THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

50c PDC
AUGUST

starring

APRIL DANCER
and
MARK SLATE

in a novel of
unbearable suspense

THE MESMERIZING MIST AFFAIR

By ROBERT HART DAVIS

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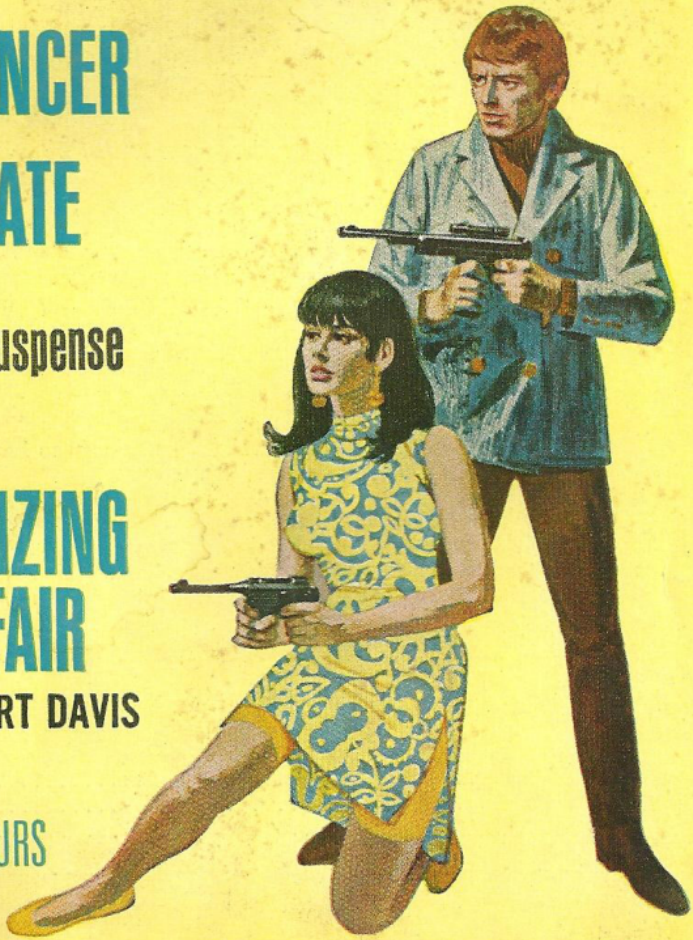

The Mesmerizing Mist Affair

Number V of *The Girl From UNCLE*

Robert Hart Davis

Tags:Grizli777

THE MESMERIZING MIST AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Strange, deadly, was the Nazi madman's dream of making the world his prey. But the crazy plan would work–unless April Dancer could escape from hell in time to flag U.N.C.L.E. into action!

ONE

TERROR FROM TIBET?

The man at the door did a hopeful double take. Could the girl in the corner be his blind date? She was about the right age and was seated at the designated table.

Practiced eyes roved over everything that showed above the table. Provocative features, lambent black eyes, raven locks with highlights that shone like burnished ebony and flowed dramatically to slim, delicately carved shoulders.

He prolonged the visual caress. The exquisitely molded figure did pleasing things to a white sweater.

The exploration continued below the table. He decided he had never seen more gorgeous gams. That did it! He sighed his disappointment and turned away. This smoky-eyed girl did not fit his sister's lukewarm description.

Gazing half-heartedly around room, he saw that Palm Beach's favorite pub was twittering with females, none of whom remotely resembled the bookworm Grace had described.

Drat that brother-in-law of his!

If John Shepard hadn't decided to yank his young wife back to New York at a moment's notice, Grace would be with him, at Taboo. There would be no need for this surreptitious surveillance.

He brightened perceptibly as he again feasted his eyes on the girl at the corner table.

"Why fight it?" he thought. "The little wren didn't show up, so I'll try bagging this gorgeous peacock. I've got a tailor-made opening gambit. I am looking for Grace's former schoolmate and that is the right table."

He bent over the table. The girl's direct gaze threw him off-stride for a moment. The confidence instilled by years of easy feminine conquests and a natural glibness came to his aid. He turned on his best smile.

"I'd be an awful liar if I said my sister described you accurately. No woman could. However, you are sitting at the right table. I'm Robert

Walton. I was told to meet you here."

The sooty eyes softened. "Sit down, Bob. I assume Gracie couldn't make it." Walton closed his mouth with an effort, but his eyes retained the glaze of shock. The girl's features revealed a quick apprehension. She darted a quick glance over first one shoulder, then the other, before turning back to the widened eyes.

"What's wrong, Bob? You look as though you were seeing an apparition. "

Bob Walton continued to goggle, as he eased his long legs under the table. "Miraculous vision is more like it. How can that astigmatic sister of mine get around without a white cane and a seeing-eye dog? I can't believe it. You *are* April Dancer."

Her low-throated chuckle sounded like the purr of a baby tiger. The cadence set off a tingling sensation from the tip to the base of Bob Walton's spine.

The voice of the vision across the table matched the low music of her laugh. "How flattering! You were trying to pick me up. I'm a little puzzled, though. What made you so sure I wasn't April Dancer?"

"By the time Grace got through brainwashing me, I was convinced you would have squinty eyes, slightly stooped shoulders, lank hair, concave chest and knobby knees. She spent hours telling me how smart you were and that you put in most of your time at college with your nose buried in books."

Walton made a derisive gesture. "Sis bent my ear all the way to the airport with stories illustrating your scholastic accomplishments and superior intelligence. The last thing she said when I put her aboard the plane was, 'Please don't bore April with your gay boulevardier routine. It's important that she respects you. We need her help. April is not an ordinary person. She's a deductive genius."

April Dancer studied the smooth, tanned features and sun-bleached blond hair. Bob Walton was as attractive as his sister had pictured him. She liked the friendly blue eyes, the breezy charm and the casual way he wore his brown linen slacks and suede jacket.

"Gracie wasn't too clear about your problem," she said. "I gather that your grandmother has been acting strangely. Sounds as though she needs a competent psychiatrist."

"You couldn't get Granny within a mile of a headshrinker. She refuses to see her own physician. She won't even see Sis and me, and we're her only relatives, since mother died. She won't even sign a check without a counter-signature from Gandura and Krishna."

"Gandura? Krishna?"

"Gandura is the head of the Bahalia cult. She calls Krishna her spiritual consort. Between them, they've got Granny and a batch of her cronies mesmerized. The old girl and her fellow-disciples have

been back from a so-called pilgrimage to Tibet for two weeks, but no one has seen them. They're all living at Granny's place, along with a way-out assortment of Hindus or Arabs or something."

Walton's voice rose indignantly. "Would you believe it? A half dozen of these turbaned weirdoes actually had the nerve to turn Grace and me away when we tried to drive in the gate to her estate the other day."

"Have you telephoned Mrs. Twombley?"

"Several times. The first was after I saw Gandura on Worth Avenue. I was driving down the Avenue and she was on the sidewalk, in front of Bonwit Teller. I called to her. She looked straight at me, so I know she heard me. By the time I parked the car, she had disappeared. I called Granny as soon as I could reach a telephone. Some character with a foreign accent said Mrs. Twombley was asleep and couldn't be disturbed. I tell you, I was really bugged. Grace and I hadn't even known she was in Palm Beach. I wouldn't have thought of calling if I hadn't seen Gandura. Granny was a washout when I finally got her on the phone."

"Were you on good terms with your grandmother when she left New York to go overseas?"

"The best. I drove her to Kennedy Airport in my car. She and Grace held hands all the way. Granny talked a blue streak about the great plans she had for us. She gave us a whopping big check and the receipts for a couple of maisonettes she had leased for Grace and her husband and for me, at the Everglades Club. That was six months ago."

He shook his head in obvious puzzlement. "She couldn't have been more affectionate. She cried a little, just like she always does when she leaves us for a while, as she and those two cult creeps went aboard the plane. The last thing she said was, 'Be sure to meet me at the airport in Palm Beach, when I return.' I tell you, I don't get it. Granny, Grace and I used to be virtually inseparable. Now, we can't get near her."

April nodded sympathetically. "I don't blame you for being upset. What did your grandmother say when you finally spoke with her?"

"Same old routine every time. She's busy with very important matters. No time for anything except religious meditations. She'll get in touch with us when she wants to see us and she'd appreciate it if we would not bother her at this time. Once, I heard Gandura's voice in the background. Granny was repeating what she was told like a parrot."

"How did Mrs. Twombley happen to meet Gandura and Krishna?"

"One of her pals in New York took her to a lecture at Town Hall. The Bahalia Movement had just become the dowagers' delight. Grace

and I were stupid. We thought it was a passing fad. First thing we knew, she had swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker."

"Did she discuss the Movement with you, at all?"

"Constantly. If I hadn't been a fathead I might have done something before it was too late, but I didn't even bother to listen, most of the time. Grace wasn't much more attentive, but she says now, she remembers that Granny used to talk about something she called *The Mist* that transported her into another dimension, where she received direct orders from a Divinity."

Bob Walton looked at April sheepishly. "I hate to admit it, but we thought the Bahalia Movement was doing her a lot of good. She perked up amazingly. She owns the controlling interest in the country's largest railroad combine, but hadn't taken the slightest interest in what made the roads tick until she became a disciple. First thing you know, she started attending stockholder meetings and lining up proxies and things. Before we realized it, she had taken over active management of her enterprises. The old girl began to have the time of her life. Her eyes began to sparkle. She seemed to have a new lease on living."

"In other words, you and Grace weren't worried about your grandmother until she returned from Tibet?"

"Right. We wouldn't be too worried now, if it was nothing more than just giving us the brush-off, but the way she's doing it is crazy. Guards at the gate of her estate; all her checks countersigned by Krishna and Gandura; she and her cronies holed up in that place for two weeks without anyone seeing them going in or out. All that mystery stuff."

April's gaze was speculative. She decided to take the plunge. "There's something a lot more mysterious and unexplainable than the things you've told me, Bob. We've checked with every known form of transportation–trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific plane lines, steamship lines, domestic airlines, all available charter-planes and charter yachts–both here and abroad. Also railroads, charter limousines and bus lines in this country. There is no record of your grandmother or any of her entourage entering the country and no one, not even your grandmother's neighbors or a stray taxi driver, saw her arrive in Palm Beach."

Walton's eyes were searching. "I'm beginning to get the pitch. Your talk with Grace wasn't just an accident. You're investigating these Bahalia crumbs. How come? Sis told me that you belong to an organization that combats international crime. I understood your outfit operates strictly in the upper echelons. This looks like a small time, pseudo-religious swindle to me."

April Dancer looked around carefully. "I'm going to confide in you.

We might solve your family problem and you may be able to help us. Mr. Waverly, the head of U.N.C.L.E., is convinced that the cult is a front for an international power-combine called THRUSH. He has more reasons for thinking so than I can explain right now, but one of them is that Tibet, where the Bahalia group has its headquarters, is now under Red Chinese domination."

She lowered her voice. "The Red Chinese angle is only the starter. A couple of years ago, Kurt von Krause, who was the top terrorist in Nazi Germany and is now an upper-echelon member of THRUSH, disappeared from East Berlin.

"Our agents traced him to a Tibetan village. He disappeared from there without leaving a trace. Perhaps it was only a coincidence that his disappearance coincided with the Bahalia Movement's first sortie into the United States. So far, we can't prove Krause has any connection whatsoever with this outfit. It's one of Alexander Waverly's hunches. And, his hunches have an uncanny faculty of turning into fact."

April reached across the table and took Bob Walton's hand. "I was so confident you and Gracie would help us that I arranged for one of my associates to join us here at Taboo. Here he comes now."

Walton squeezed the hand and beamed. "You can count on me."

He rose to his feet as a slight, young man with a tousled mop of sandy hair smiled down at him. They shook hands. Walton's eyes roved over a beautifully tailored tweed jacket and red linen slacks, wine colored beach-sandals and–he blinked–the gaudiest waistcoat he had ever laid eyes on.

The newcomer chuckled as he followed Walton's bemused gaze. "Sixteen colors. Count 'em."

April said, "Bob Walton, Mark Slate. Mark, Bob has promised to help us."

Slate shook hands with Walton, slid onto the seat beside April Dancer and snapped his fingers at a passing waitress. "That is great news! Let's have one for the road and then get cracking. I've got news for dear old Uncle Waverly that won't keep."

He glanced at the bare expanse of table in front of Walton. His grin widened. "No drink in front of you, eh? You obviously didn't need alcoholic adhesive to keep you glued to April's table. I'm not surprised. She has that effect on young men. They even forget to drink."

Bob Walton smiled back at him. "Don't try to tell me you're too ancient to get the same effect, Daddy-o."

TWO

SIGHTED SAHIBS–SUNK BY SAME

Mark Slate released a long, low whistle as they walked out of Taboo and approached the white, low-slung sportscar at the curb.

"Special-built body. Probably by Frascatti," he muttered. "I've never seen anything quite like it. Hold everything, children. I've got to see what's under that crazy hood."

April Dancer took a firm grip on a tweedy arm. She pulled Mark Slate onto the front seat beside her, as Bob Walton slipped under the wheel.

"You can play with Bob's toys later, little boy. Right now, we have more important things to do. Give it the gas, Roberto. We're due to contact U.N.C.L.E. in five minutes. Do you think this monster can get us out of traffic and on a country lane in that length of time?"

Walton beamed like a happy child, as they zoomed northward on the island's main thoroughfare.

"You'll probably laugh yourself to death when you *do* see the motor," he said to Slate. "It was specially designed for me by Rolls Royce. I hit two-hundred and fifty on Daytona Beach with this mongrel heap."

Mark Slate chuckled. "Mongrel is right. Britain's finest motor in Italy's flashiest bit of chromium vulgarity. Only a pixilated millionaire with monoxide on his breath and petrol in his veins could dream up that combination. I usually avoid rich bums who can afford more powerful cars than I drive, but I'll make an exception in your case. Providing you take me with you the next time you bum the sands of time on Daytona Beach."

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't have to see the broad grins on both faces to know that this was going to be a smooth-working combine. Her colleague's way of showing dislike was a sickeningly polite routine, larded with unction and loaded with hidden malice. When Mark Slate took the trouble to insult someone at first meeting, it augured a warm and lasting friendship.

"How's this for privacy?" Walton said, as he eased the car through sand dunes to the water's edge. "You know how to work the aerial telephone, don't you? Shall I take a walk while you contact your party?"

April said, 'The answer to your first question is 'perfect.' To the second, 'Yes.' To the third, 'No.' You're one of us, now. I want you to see how we operate."

She held up the twin to a fountain pen Mark had just removed from his pocket. Walton gaped, as tiny chromium antennas popped up from both pens and the two slipped small, flesh-colored discs into their ears.

Slate pushed up a detaining hand. "Before we tune in, I want to tell

you what I stumbled onto today, by sheer accident. I would have told you sooner, but I didn't want to take the least chance of being overheard, back there." His eyes glowed. "It looks as though Mr. Waverly was–"

April checked the flow of words with a gesture. "I'll hear the whole story when you talk to the boss. Whatever it is. It's your discovery and you're darn well going to have the fun of breaking it to Mr. Waverly."

Slate smiled his thanks. They both touched the tiny buttons that tuned them in to headquarters. April signaled for him to begin.

"Slate here. Cheerio, Randy. Mr. Waverly there? Tell me the story of your misspent life while we're waiting for him. Yes, April is with me. What's that strange snuffling noise at your end? Sounds like a dog panting. No dog? I might have known. April always does that to your respiration. Carry on, dear boy. I'll plug out until the boss comes on."

Mark Slate winked at Bob Walton as he removed the ear-plug.

April said, "Hello, Randy. Yes, he's plugged out. What a nice thing to say! Thank you, Randy. I miss you too. He is? I want Mark to talk to him first. "

Mark Slate acknowledged her signal. "Mr. Waverly? April insisted I break the good news. No. It's not that good. I haven't seen Krause, but I did see Fritz Waller, his former Storm-trooper bodyguard. I thought you'd be pleased. He's right where you thought Krause might be. On the Twombley estate. I followed him there in a taxi.

"Well, every entrance is crawling with Arab guards. Yes. Arabs. In flowing bournouses. Right. It does smell like Krause. I think we can get in without too much trouble.

"Thanks to April's powers of persuasion, or something, we've got Mrs. Twombley's grandson, Bob Walton, on our team. It certainly is a break. I'll put April on. Here she is, sir."

As April Dancer began a detailed and concise report of their joint activities, Slate motioned to young Walton and pointed toward the front of the car. They were still huddled under the hood, discussing the motor in muted whispers, as she signed off.

When the girl from U.N.C.L.E wriggled out of the car, the movement raised her skin-tight miniskirt. There was a clanking sound under the hood and a muffled "ouch!" Walton's head appeared. His fingers were gently massaging his scalp. Mark's sandy thatch of hair came into view. There was reproach in his gaze as he surveyed the satin-like epidermis revealed by the hiked skirt.

"I'm surprised at you. Only a wicked wench would try to steal a boy from his motorcar."

April's expressive features contorted into a fetching scowl. The tip of a pink tongue extended briefly. "You're a nasty prude," she said. "I'm sure Bob will agree."

Slate grinned, said, “I listened in on Mr. Waverly’s instructions, despite my preoccupation with this petrol-propelled Frankenstein. I know you are anxious to question Bob on ways and means of entry to his grandmother’s estate. Kiss the bruise on his poor little head and proceed with the interrogation.”

It was fairly dark when Walton tooled his powerful car onto a side road, a block from the Twombley estate. The trio padded silently along the ocean beach.

“This is the spot,” Walton whispered. “Grandfather Twombley showed it to me when I was a little boy. Granny never did know about it. He used it to sneak out after she thought he was safely tucked in the feathers.”

April and Mark looked at the towering stone wall, with its gaudy filigree of marble statuary. It looked as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. Bob Walton smiled at their puzzlement. His fingers probed behind a statue. The stone panel behind the marble figure descended silently.

April motioned for Walton to precede them. The moonlight revealed another row of marble statuary on the inside portion of the wall. Bob’s fingers probed again. The stone panel slid back into place.

Young Walton led them through a wealth of tropical shrubbery to a grassy knoll. They ascended marble steps to a small, pillared pavilion. She and Mark exchanged glances. The place was a veritable fortress. Every inch of the lavishly planted acres was guarded by towering walls, topped by barbed wire. They had made enough exploratory trips in a small boat to realize that the wall on the lakeside was fully as formidable a barrier as the one they had just penetrated, via a secret panel.

April surveyed the rambling wings of the Twombley mansion and drew both men close. “Lead us to your grandmother’s suite,” she whispered. “The next stop should be the guest quarters. Try to figure out where your grandmother would put a big wheel like Krause.”

Mark Slate interrupted her. “Now remember, kids. This is only a scouting foray. We’ll keep under cover and stay outside. With luck and Bob’s knowledge of the premises, we should be able to see who is in the house, without gaining entry. Careful now. Let’s stay close together.”

April said, “Lead the way. Mark will be right at your heels. I’ll act as the rear-guard.”

They climbed a marble staircase to a second floor terrace. Eight large windows shed soft light through louvered shutters. April peered through the narrow slits. She saw a huge, high-ceilinged room, crammed with Spanish-style furniture. Her eyes traveled to the figure seated before an ornate dressing table. The woman was combing her hair. Slate and Walton joined April Dancer at the window.

Walton bent over and peered through the louvered slits.

"That's Granny," he whispered. The three moved away from the window, into the shadows of an enormous banyan tree.

Slate said, "Krause is our principal objective. Let's get cracking."

April touched Mark's arm and nudged Bob Walton. She pointed to the stairs they had recently traversed. Both men heard the soft shuffling sound that had caught her attention.

"Follow me," Walton whispered. He leaped high, caught a thick branch of the overhanging tree, drew himself up and reached down. A moment later, April found herself sitting breathlessly on the limb beside him. Walton reached down again. Slate joined them on the limb. They peered through the leaves.

"That was close, Tarzan," April breathed softly.

White-robed figures were swarming over the terrace they just had vacated. The trio in the tree held a collective breath. Slate counted six scurrying burnouses in the pale moonlight. The sound of a clanging bell split the silence. Voices peppered the shrubbery beneath them.

April muttered, "Sighted sahibs. Sunk by same."

THREE
TIPTOE THROUGH THE TREETOPS

April Dancer waited until the shadowy figures on the terrace joined the searching party in the gardens, before removing her sandals and peeling off her stockings. She placed them in the bag she carried over her left shoulder.

Walton's teeth gleamed in the dim light. "Good thinking! We have plenty of maneuvering room up here, but this bark can be slippery."

The two men removed footwear and socks. Slate took the bag from April, slipped their gear into it and tossed it over his shoulder. Walton pointed upward. They edged along behind him on the sturdy limb until they reached the trunk of the tree. The twisted tendrils, carved into the hole by nature, made it easy climbing.

Mark Slate stifled a whistle as he reached the platform occupied by April and Walton. What a playpen! It resembled the tree-houses of his youth about as closely as a Rolls Royce duplicates a Volkswagen.

Skillfully concealed in the heart of the tall, spreading banyan, a good fifty above the ground, this was the most elaborate arboreal residence he had ever encountered. Thatched roof, mats on the smooth wooden floor, two comfortable wicker chairs and an inviting wicker couch.

Mark Slate made a beeline for the couch and stretched out, full-length. "A spot of tea, my good man."

April made shushing noises as she sank into a chair.

Walton said, “These leaves deaden sound very effectively.

Anyhow, we’re too high up for anyone to hear anything short of a shrill scream. Our only worry right now is whether someone down there will guess that we’re up a tree.”

“You can forget that possibility,” Slate said. “Nobody but a champion high jumper could even touch the limb you grabbed and muscled up to. I saw another set of steps at the end of the terrace. It’s a thousand to one bet they think we went thataway.”

He stretched and yawned. “Some day, when you have nothing better to do, you must show us your athletic medals.” He turned to April. “What now, peerless leader? Bob got us out on a limb and off of it. Now, it’s up to you.”

“We’re still in Tarzan’s capable hands. Tell me, Nature Boy, does this crazy green umbrella spread over any part of the guest quarters?”

“I remember looking directly into the guest rooms from a limb on the north fork.”

April said, “I hope we can get close enough to bug some conversation. Lead on, Bob. It sounds as though the Arabs have gone back to their hashish and houkas.”

Mark Slate picked up April’s bag and started to fit it over his shoulder. She extended a hand. “Let me have it. I’ll shove it into this squirrel hole. We’ll pick it up later. I’ve got all the gadgets I need on my charm bracelet. “

Walton began the descent. As they reached the lower levels and felt their way through dense foliage, April marveled at the banyan’s magnificent spread. By the time they saw light from the house filtering through the leaves, she had decided that the tree must cover at least a half acre.

They edged along a limb. The room they peered into was a slightly smaller counterpart of Mrs. Twombley’s sleeping quarters. Slate nudged Walton as he caught sight of a woman in a throne like chair.

“The glamorous Gandura,” he whispered.

The trio watched the tiny Indian, as she sat at a table, sipping something that looked like tea and poring through a sheaf of manuscript paper. April gazed enviously at the gold-embossed gown that ended at Gandura’s dimpled knees. She had seen one just like it at Bergdorf Goodman’s. The price tag was $3,000.

Her eyes traveled from Gandura to a slowly opening door. The door opened and a man she recognized as Krishna walked in. As the man in the flowing robes joined the tiny Indian beauty at the table, April whispered, “We’re wasting time here. Let’s try another suite. Krause is our main objective.”

April turned to Bob Walton. “Push your eyes back into their sockets and lead us to some of the other rooms in the guest wing.”

Slate placed a detaining hand on her arm. “Wait a minute. We’re close enough to listen in. Let’s bug the room. We may not have another chance.”

April nodded. She slipped a tiny cylinder from one of the charms on her bracelet. Slate extracted a small, odd-shaped pistol, shoved the cylinder into the barrel, took careful aim and fired. The tiny object struck soundlessly against the window-sill and clung there. April and Mark inserted tiny earphones. They heard Gandura say, “Did you discover the reason for all the commotion?”

The man ignored the question and leaned over to embrace the seated figure. Gandura pushed him away impatiently.

“I asked you a question,” she said. “I would appreciate an answer.”

The man helped himself to a cigarette before sinking into a chair on the opposite side. He gazed at the beauty across the table for a few moments in silence. When he spoke, his voice showed his anger.

“I do not like being repulsed, especially by you. You see, I happen to know that, despite your proficiency in languages, you are lower-caste Hindu. If it had not been for THRUSH’s helping hand, you would still be in the slums of Calcutta.”

Until now, April and Mark had viewed Gandura and Krishna from afar. Neither had been close enough to hear them speak. As one of the top linguists in U.N.C.L.E., Slate not only spoke many languages fluently, but he was familiar with the dialectic nuances of each tongue. Both were speaking English, but Mark’s sensitive ear found their accent revealing.

He grinned wryly at Krishna’s insulting remark. The man was right. Gandura was of low-caste origin. However, Krishna’s accent was even more revealing. It showed that he was not a native born Indian.

Gandura’s low-pitched voice interrupted his thoughts. “May I remind you that our partnership is a business one? I am your equal in this venture and I do not have to tolerate either your advances or your insults. If you persist, I will report you to our superiors. I don’t think I need tell you that THRUSH expects single-minded and dedicated service from its personnel. “

The man opposite her glowered, then shrugged. His voice was placating. “Sorry I lost my temper, but that hands-off attitude of yours gets on my nerves. Frankly, I fail to see why we can’t combine pleasure with business.”

Gandura made an impatient sound.

“‘Very well,” he said, “In answer to your question, the commotion obviously was the result of a guard’s overheated imagination. We found nothing.”

A cracking sound distracted the attention of the listening pair in the tree. They turned, just in time to see Bob Walton plunge

downward. Mark steadied April with one hand. Both gazed down in consternation at the prone figure on the turf below.

Mark released his hold. “I’m going down after him.”

April said, “You’ll need me. From the way that leg is twisted under him, it’s probably broken.”

They wormed their way through the tree until they reached one of the thick, sucker-roots that supported the banyan’s heavy limbs. Shinnying down the root, they broke into a fast trot. Walton was struggling to his feet when they reached him. Mark knelt and pushed him back.

“Relax, boy,” he cautioned. “Let’s see how badly you’re hurt. Oh-Oh! You were right, April. A broken leg. I can feel the bone grate when he moves. Let’s form a cradle with our arms and get him out of here.”

Walton protested. “I can get along on one leg. Let me lean on you.”

They helped him to his feet. Walton leaned on Mark’s shoulder, took a tentative step and fell, dragging the latter to the turf with him.

“Enough of this nonsense,” April said.

She and Slate helped Walton to his feet again. They formed a cradle with clasped hands. The injured man eased himself onto the improvised sling. Walton was amazed at the strength in the girl’s slender arms and body. She didn’t falter for a moment as they moved slowly toward the distant wall.

The sound of excited voices galvanized the carriers into greater effort.

“They’re heading this way,” Walton said. “Let me down. We haven’t got a Chinaman’s chance of making it like this. That wall is a quarter of a mile away.”

He pushed himself erect and balanced by holding onto both of them. His face was gray with pain.

“Listen, and don’t argue. If they find me alone, they’ll think I’m nosing around on my own, trying to discover why Granny is giving Grace and me the brush-off. If they see you two, we’re finished. They’ll know U.N.C.L.E. is investigating them. On your way. Don’t worry. They won’t bump me off. Killing Mrs. Twombley’s grandson wouldn’t make sense.”

Walton handed his car keys to Mark, gently shoved them away and sank to the lawn. “On your way. Please!”

April bent and kissed his cheek. “Bob is right.”

She reached into his inside jacket pocket and attached her fountain-pen, with its hidden aerial. Palming the tiny, flesh-colored earpiece that U.N.C.L.E. agents use with the fountain-pen transmitter, she dropped it into the same pocket.

“Contact us the first chance you get. You saw how the combo

works. You'd better put the ear-gadget in your wallet. The pen won't attract attention if you're searched, but someone might get ideas if they saw the earphone."

The voices were getting alarmingly close. April kissed Bob Walton's cheek again. The two dashed toward the marble figures that marked the secret entrance.

Slate inserted a deft finger. The wall panel opened. They were through and on the beach side in seconds. He eased the panel back into place with a sure touch. Their bare feet made soft crunching sounds as they ran through the sand. Neither of them paused until they reached the parked car.

April Dancer looked back and Slate kept one eye glued to the rear-view mirror as they sped up the ocean highway. There was no sign of pursuit.

The car skidded around a sharp curve and headed for the heart of Palm Beach.

Slate eased up slightly on the accelerator. "Poor kid! I certainly hated to leave him there. He was right, of course. We couldn't have made it with him. They'll certainly think he was snooping around his grandmother's estate, for family reasons."

April Dancer sighed. "We've put Bob in jeopardy and accomplished exactly nothing. We still don't know if Krause is in the house. We don't even know for sure that he has any connection with the Bahalia Movement. Incidentally, what did Krause do during World War II that makes him such a dangerous man?"

"He was the Nazis' chief terrorist. He and his gang preceded the invading forces by infiltrating into each country. They dynamited railroad bridges, grounded planes, blew up ammunition dumps, destroyed vital factories and paralyzed transportation. Krause is the principal reason Hitler's invasions were virtually unopposed. He is an expert linguist. Speaks a dozen languages. He took his crew into doomed countries and softened them up, months before the military action began."

"But, what makes him dangerous now? The Germans don't have an army."

"You'd know the answer to that question if you hadn't been on vacation at U.N.C.L.E.'s last briefing. Krause has become one of the upper echelon of THRUSH since the war. Mr. Waverly thinks there's a frightening possibility that history may repeat itself, with THRUSH's hand taking the place of Hitler's at the helm.

"Remember when Hitler formed an alliance with Russia for his own purposes, then double-crossed his ally? Our top men think that the hard-core remnants of the Nazis have been persuaded by THRUSH to hook up with China's Red Guard. They've got a good sales talk for

both sides. The war-mongering Nazis need man-power. The equally military-minded Red Guard needs atomic and other technical know-how.

"Think what that combination could do under the malevolent guidance of THRUSH! Of course, both sides would be puppets. THRUSH always pulls the strings."

"I see why Mr. Waverly considers this an important assignment. What a shame we couldn't have located Krause at the Twombley estate! We might have been able to clip THRUSH's wings, whatever they're up to."

"We did locate Krause." Slate smiled at April's obvious puzzlement. "You couldn't possibly have known, of course. You've never seen or talked with the man, as I have."

April exclaimed excitedly, "Of course! That's the reason U.N.C.L.E. lost the trail in Tibet. Plastic surgery! Krishna is Krause. You recognized his voice."

FOUR
DIG THAT CRAZY BLIMP!

The blinding beam of a powerful flashlight caused Bob Walton to wince and raise a shielding hand to his eyes, as several white-robed figures crowded around him.

"Point that thing somewhere else," he said. "If you can't see by this time that I'm Mrs. Twombley's grandson, you're even more stupid than Granny's usual brand of domestics."

He let out a yip of pain as two of the men yanked him to his feet and pinioned his arms behind him. "Take it easy! My left leg is broken."

The tallest of the men facing him in the moonlight, spoke in a deep guttural voice. "Hold him securely. He probably is lying."

Bob Walton glared at him. "Just what do you think I was doing, stretched out, full-length, on the lawn? Picking dandelions?"-

"That is a good question. What *are* you doing on Mrs. Twombley's lawn at this hour?"

"What right have you to question me? I'm here to see my grandmother, of course. Let's stop horsing around. I demand that you take me to Mrs. Twombley, at once."

The tall man's teeth gleamed in the moonlight. "I find that very amusing. You are here to see Mrs. Twombley. Do you always call on relatives barefoot? You took a decidedly roundabout way to the front door. My men have been following you all over the grounds for the past hour."

"So what? This place has been my home since I was a little boy.

What I do and where I go on my grandmother's estate is none of your business. Are you taking me to Mrs. Twombley, or do I have to come back with the police and force my way into the house?"

The tall man drew one of the robed figures aside. There was a whispered consultation. The shorter man returned, bent over the injured leg and ran unexpectedly gentle fingers over the surface. He straightened up with a grunt.

"A very definite fracture. He will have to be carried." He gestured toward a shadowy figure in the background. "You know where the stretchers are in my laboratory. Please bring one here at once."

"Herr Doctor," the tall man said, "you have skilled fingers. Would you be so kind as to search our bumptious invader? He obviously is a professional burglar. Mrs. Twombley's grandson would never be found barefoot skulking in the shadows. Please make the search a thorough one."

Light fingers patted Walton from neck to toe, before probing into his pockets.

"Nothing lethal," the prober observed. He handed the tall man the objects extracted from Walton's pockets. The latter examined them with interest. He seemed disappointed.

"A well-filled wallet, some loose change and a fountain pen. He probably threw whatever weapons and burglar tools he has into the bushes when he heard us approaching. We will make a search in the morning." He started to place the assorted objects in the folds of his robe.

Walton emitted a contemptuous snort. "You were right about one thing. There is a robber on the premises. My thieving friend, that wallet contains fifteen-hundred dollars of my money. Unless you like the idea of spending the balance of the season in a Palm Beach jail, I suggest you return my personal belongings."

After a momentary hesitation, the man walked to Walton and slipped wallet and fountain pen into an inside pocket of his jacket. The change was dropped into a side pocket.

"That's better," Walton said. "Now tell your goons to release my right arm so I can prove my identity. I have my driver's license, Diner's card and several personal cards in my wallet."

Cold gray eyes probed blue. Bob Walton returned the stare unwaveringly.

"Your cards mean less than nothing. One can have such things forged. You will be released if Mrs. Twombley identifies you. Otherwise, you will be held until we find out who you are and what you are up to."

He extracted a large white handkerchief as the man approached with the stretcher. Walton opened his mouth to protest. The kerchief

was forced between his teeth. Another was placed over the makeshift gag and tied at the back of his neck. Still another blotted out his vision. A moist substance was held against his nostrils. There was an overpowering odor of anesthetic. He fought against the encroaching fumes with each gasping breath.

Balancing himself on one leg, Walton shook off his captors with a mighty effort. He heard a voice say, “I’ve given him enough to make an elephant fall over!”

Flailing arms were seized again. Pungent odor assaulted olfactory nerves. His captors swore as they were tossed about. Freeing one arm with a savage jerk, Walton tore the cloth from his eyes, ripped off the gag and smashed a fist into the nearest face. The man went down like a felled ox. Four men seized the struggling figure.

The tall man’s eyes glinted with admiration. The young giant resembled a wild horse, as he tossed his blond mane and glared around him. Bob Walton suddenly stopped struggling. The distended eyes narrowed.

Leaning back into encircling arms, he smiled beatifically. He was still smiling like a happy child when they took him off the stretcher and placed his unconscious body on a cot in his grandmother’s wine cellar.

Back in her suite at the Breakers Hotel, the girl from U.N.C.L.E. paced the floor. Mark Slate’s lean length sprawled like a boneless squid on a nearby divan. He lifted a limp hand to attract his colleague’s attention.

“Honey, you’re going to wear a trail right through that expensive rug. Calm down. Bob is a big boy. He can take care of himself until we come and get him. Let’s give him a little more time before we do anything drastic.”

April stopped pacing and glared at the inert figure. “How can you lie there like a reclining Buddha, when that kid is somewhere with a broken leg and–and God knows what else, at this point?”

Slate stifled a noisy yawn and slowly straightened up. To the annoyed girl, the deliberately rising figure resembled a tapeworm unwinding in sections.

Slate peered at her owlishly. “April, my sweet, you obviously do not have the confidence in that big tough boy that I have. Let’s be logical. They have no reason to suspect he is anything more than he appears to be, a disgruntled young man, determined to see his grandmother at any cost. Mr. Waverly told us to give Bob twenty-four hours to contact us, before we stormed the place with the police. We have almost a half-hour to go I don’t have to remind you there is too much at stake to expose our hand needlessly. I think you will agree we should follow the boss’s orders to the letter.”

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. flung herself into a chair. Her voice was penitent. “Sorry, Mark. You’re right, as usual. I’m just taking out my frustration on you. Underneath that maddeningly relaxed exterior you’re as worried as I am. I saw the look in your eyes when we walked away from Bob.”

As Slate started to speak, both of them heard the faint “beep” that signified an incoming message. Earphones had been in place for hours. They grasped fountain pen transmitters and pressed the receiving buttons.

A wide grin split Slate’s face as Walton’s cheery voice came over. “Tarzan speaking. Me got message for brother-ape, Mark King Kong, and beautiful native-girl, April Showers. Do you read me?”

Mark signaled for April to speak. “Gosh! It’s good to hear your voice. What about that leg? Are you in pain? Where are you? Are you sure the room you’re in isn’t bugged?”

The laugh that came over sounded like a carefree boy. “Believe it or not, these creeps have a first class doctor on the premises. The leg is in a cast and doing fine. Not a twinge. Don’t worry about my prison being bugged. I’m down in Granny’s wine-cellar. The concrete walls are eight-feet thick. Ditto for the ceiling. I know. I was around when they built it.”

Slate raised a hand. “What about the light fixtures, Bob? They could be wired for sound, you know.”

“No light fixtures. My grandfather was adamant about that. He wanted his wine cellars in the same unadorned state as those he had seen in European castles. I can see the old boy now, flashing a lantern around the cellar, when he came down here for booze.”

“You poor kid!” April said. “You mean you’re lying there in total darkness?”

“Nope. They left me a lantern, just like the ones dear old granddad used to have. Incidentally, at the risk of being indelicate, grandpa did make one concession to civilization. Sanitary facilities. I have the very distinct impression that the old dear spent quite a lot of time down here. Granny always frowned on immoderate elbow-bending.”

“What about ventilation?” Slate asked.

“Four enormous openings cut through the concrete walls. Windows at the end of each opening. They’re all open at the moment. I even have a view of sorts.”

April said, “Are the openings large enough to crawl through?”

“Plenty. There’s one little catch, though. Each opening is adorned with six thick iron bars. Take my word for it. They are impregnable.”

“I presume you’re being fed and watered,” Slate said. “Who is your contact? Krishna or Gandura been down to see you? I know there’s no use asking if you’ve seen your grandmother.”

“I’m living on the fat of the land,” Walton said. “The guy who brings my food is a tongue-tied Arab. A tall man with a definitely Teutonic accent has tried to pump me, with negative results. No Krishna. No Gandura. And, no Granny. I think–” he broke off abruptly. “Don’t go away. Something is stirring down by the tennis courts. I’m going to douse the lantern and crawl out to the window. Be right back.”

The two heard shuffling sounds, interspersed with subdued groans, then silence.

Walton’s voice finally came over. It was barely audible. “Dig that crazy, mixed-up blimp! Kids, you wouldn’t believe this if you saw it. Something that looks like a giant soup tureen is hovering over the tennis courts. I tell you it’s uncanny. The darn thing isn’t making a sound. So that’s why Granny’s neighbors haven’t seen her coming or going.”

A period of silence. The snuffling noises and the groans were resumed. The voice had faded to a whisper when the pair in the room heard it again.

“I’m back in bed. Signing off. Someone’s at the door.”

FIVE
TEA IN A FLYING SAUCER

Mr. Waverly’s voice continued its deliberate, measured cadence. “Listen carefully. Both of you must return to the Twombley estate. Make careful preparations. One question at this time. Does the giant banyan tree you described overlook the tennis courts?”

Mark gestured to April. She responded. “It does. One section of the tree actually spreads over some of them. Incidentally, there are six courts in a row and the backstops are unusually deep. An ideal spot, made to order, for a vertical landing.”

“Excellent! Let us get on with preparations. April, check your travel kit to make sure you have our latest model telescopic night camera. While you are doing so, I will brief Mark. Are you ready for instructions?”

“As our young friend, Mr. Walton, would say, ‘I dig you,’ Please proceed, sir.”

“Mark, this is one time when your R.A.P. background and engineering training could prove invaluable. April’s assignment will be to take pictures of the mystery craft from every possible angle. You will take along sketch-pads and drawing gear. Be meticulous in your drawings. Perhaps you had better use the Malayan jungle technique of strapping yourself into the tree, so both hands will be free. We mustn’t have another accidental fall. “

Slate said, “Excuse the interruption, sir, but the tree-house is the logical place for me. It has a table, chairs and a couch. My athletic colleague can clamber all over the tree to make her pictures, but I think you will agree that I should have a stationary base, to make accurate sketches.”

A sound suspiciously resembling a snort assaulted Mark’s ears. “Amazing how you can think of excuses for working in a recumbent position. Very well, my boy. I trust you to do a good job. I can’t overstress the importance of your sketches. They and your observations will furnish us with the firsthand impressions of a man who has both flown and helped construct aircraft. Also, they provide added insurance. Something might happen to April’s films. Now may I speak with the athletic Miss Dancer?

“You have the camera? Good! I know you will carry out your assignment without technical instruction from me. I think Mr. Kovac, who is sitting beside me, will agree that Miss Dancer is the finest photographer on our staff. He has signified his agreement with a fatuous smile. Sorry, I can’t put him on. Time is of the essence.

“A parting message for both of you. This mission is for the sole purpose of getting important data on a revolutionary type of aircraft. When you have accomplished that purpose, return to your hotel, immediately. Do not allow anything to delay or distract you. No matter what transpires in or around the aircraft, you are not to exceed these explicit instructions. Photograph, sketch, memorize, then leave, unobserved.

“Do not attempt to contact Mr. Walton, either from your hotel or at the estate. Turn off your receiving sets the moment I sign off. If a signal should come through from our young friend, ignore it. I will explain everything when you return from the assignment and contact me from your hotel. Any questions or remarks?”

Slate said, “No questions, sir.”

“One remark,” April said. “I know I also speak for Mark. We will carry out your instructions to the letter.”

“Well said. Good luck. Signing off.”

MARK SLATE inserted exploratory fingers between the marble statues. The panel slid down silently. He stepped through. April Dancer followed.

Both carefully surveyed the moon-drenched undergrowth. A moment later they were feeling their way cautiously through dense shrubbery. Their bare feet made only the slightest of whispering sounds in the grass. They paused and scanned the surrounding terrain with the nervous awareness of jungle-trained experts, before blending into the inky patch of darkness beneath the banyan tree.

Slate was the first to shinny up the tough fibrous root they chose for the ascent. April ignored the hand he extended and waved him on. To the impatient climbers, the distance between ground and tree-house seemed to have lengthened interminably since the previous ascent.

Mark pulled himself up to the platform. April smiled in the darkness as her comfort loving colleague collapsed onto the wicker couch with a grateful sigh. She parted dense foliage. Her involuntary gasp brought Mark Slate to his feet.

They gazed downward in rapt silence. April's first conscious thought was of the strange vehicle's awesome proportions. It sprawled over four of the six tennis courts. Slate fitted a tiny, powerful telescope to an eye and scanned the craft's lines intently.

"Incredible!" he said softly. "THRUSH has come up with something completely revolutionary."

The minute telescope traveled back and forth again. Slate shook his head in wonderment. There was no visible evidence of wing, motor or rudder. The only discernible break in the slightly obloid metal sphere was a blister that seemed to be the pilot control, with a hatch-like opening that obviously served as an entrance.

Both shrank back as a robed figure appeared at the opening. He was followed by others. As they departed, other robed figures, weighed down with bundles of various sizes and shapes, filed out of the semi-darkness into the vacated breach.

April nudged her companion. "We'd better hurry. No telling when they may take off."

She took several carefully aimed shots of the sprawling craft while Slate bent over the table and began sketching. April saw that he was having trouble with the foliage. She slipped the tiny camera into an armpit-holder and held the obstructing limbs apart for her frantically sketching confrere.

"You're on your own," she whispered, after a few moments of struggling with the foliage. "I'm going down to lower levels, for angle shots."

Slate held up a restraining hand.

"Bear with me a moment longer. I'll join you. I can't get even a minute mechanical clue from this elevation. About all I can do here is make comparison drawings to show the craft's size in relation to the surrounding terrain."

Both took a final look through telescopes before beginning the descent. A man in a white jacket and chef's hat stood in the areaway. He was talking to a tall man in a white robe. The pair hastily inserted tiny amplifiers.

They heard the man in the chef's hat say, "I'll have tea and

crumpets ready by the time you're all aboard."

The other man laughed. "You're a little mixed up, aren't you, Hans? This is hardly tea time."

"You won't think I'm mixed up when we take off. This is your first trip on this sky rocket. Believe me, there is nothing like a spot of strong, hot tea to prepare the stomach for supersonic flight."

The tall man laughed again. "When you were the head chef at the Ritz in Paris, I'll bet you never thought you'd be serving tea in a flying saucer."

The two men walked back into the craft. April and Mark tucked their amplifiers away and started down the tree.

"I'm afraid we're as low as we can get without being seen," April whispered. They straddled a limb dangerously close to the open hatch.

She took three quick shots with her camera.

"I'll have to memorize from here on," Slate whispered. "It's no good trying to sketch when I can barely retain the *status quo*."

From what could be seen of the dimly lighted interior, they might have been looking into the salon of a large group of people. They muttered his disappointment.

"Shame there isn't a hatch opening into the propulsive section. This doesn't tell me a thing."

April placed a quick hand on his arm. Voices heralded the approach of a large group of people. They peered through the leaves. Slate smothered an exclamation of dismay. Two men were carrying a stretcher. The face of the giant form on the stretcher was covered, but neither of the watchers had any doubts as to the man's identity.

Krishna and Gandura were in the group following the stretcher. Mark Slate craned his neck. He recognized Mrs. Twombley among the robed figures shuttling into the plane. There was a sharp intake of breath at his side.

"The hatch is closing," April said excitedly. "What'll we do?"

"Exactly what Mr. Waverly told us to do," Slate said woodenly, as they watched the plane door merge with the smooth surface.

The airship remained motionless for several minutes after the hatch closed.

Suddenly a blast of hot air enveloped them. Mark rubbed his eyes and April found herself gaping with open mouth. Six bare tennis courts stretched out before them. The strange-looking craft had vanished, without a sound.

April's voice shook with excitement. "Did you see what I saw? The darn thing melted into thin air. Don't tell me THRUSH has perfected a time machine."

Slate shook his head. "I'm ready to believe almost anything, at this point, but there's a more logical answer. Blinding speed. That weird

contraption went up so fast the human eye couldn't follow it."

April drew a deep breath and released it slowly. "Boy, am I glad you saw the same thing I did. I mean, didn't see the same thing I didn't. I was beginning to think I was losing my mind."

Mark Slate peered through the leaves. "Do you get the same feeling I do, that this place is completely deserted? I wonder if we can take time to check."

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. placed a firm hand on his arm and pointed toward the sea. "You know better than that. Mr. Waverly couldn't have spelled it out any clearer. Let's get out of here fast. And quietly. For all we know, the place is still crawling with guards."

"I have tremendous respect for Mr. Waverly's judgment," April remarked, as they sped toward their hotel in Walton's car. "But he may have pulled a boo boo on this mission. If we had brought the police with us, we might have captured the airship. Think what it could do in the right hands!"

She shuddered. "And think what it probably will do in the hands of an organization as evil as THRUSH!"

"As a former fighter pilot," Slate said, "I couldn't disagree with you more emphatically about the possibility of capturing that flying carpet. It's a million-to-one bet that any invading force would have been wiped out. I shudder to think what weapons they must have aboard."

April's gaze was scornful. "I'm sure you're right about the devastating power of their weapons, but you're overlooking one thing-the element of surprise. We could have brought our forces through a secret entrance that is unknown to anyone on the estate. With all the hullabaloo of departure, we might have gained access without being spotted. I didn't see a single guard. "Well, let's go!"

A half hour later, Mark Slate eased the car into a parking space near the entrance to the Breakers.

"One of the things I learned in aerial combat was to keep an eye on the cockpit of enemy craft. Apparently you didn't see the four shadowy heads moving about in that semi-transparent blister."

He chuckled, as he helped April from the car. "No offense, darling, but I'm afraid U.N.C.L.E. would be minus the services of a mediocre ex-flyer named Mark Slate and a deductive genius named April Dancer, if you had been my R.A.F. observer."

SIX
DONKEY WITH TWO TALES

The bored looking young man in the black turtle-neck sweater and shaggy gray trousers slipped onto a stool at the end of the bar. "Ale,"

he said curtly to the man in the soiled apron.

The barman slid the foaming brew to a nicely-timed stop in front of sweatered elbows. Wiping damp hands on an even damper rag, he gave the customer the swift appraisal of the veteran drink-mixer.

Lackluster eyes met his blankly, then turned away to survey the passing traffic through the little tavern's fly-blown window.

After giving the stained wood a perfunctory swipe, the barman shrugged philosophically and headed for the back. No point in wasting conversation on this one. He was all too obviously a solitary minded barfly.

Mark Slate was a naturally gregarious soul. It had taken years to perfect the chill technique. Out of the corner of one eye he saw the aproned man lean fat elbows on the bar and bury his nose in a racing form.

Mark continued to peer through the dirty window in an apparently aimless manner.

He saw a girl struggling through the press, on the sidewalk across the street. If he hadn't been concentrating on that particular patch of cement, he could easily have missed her. She was almost indistinguishable from the hurried and harried looking young housewives who milled about her.

Wisps of black hair hung damply over one eye. Her loose-fitting, coarsely-woven black sweater was hiked up on one side by a feverishly clutched parcel. A bulging shopping-bag pulled a shoulder down into an awkward slope.

Slate's eyes continued to scan the scurrying form approvingly. Stretch pants, a size too large to attract wolf whistles. Teetering high heels on black open-sandals. Over-painted mouth opening and closing rapidly on a blob of chewing-gum.

He smiled inwardly. It was very unlikely that anyone in the business and resort capitals of the world, who had been exposed to the charms of April Dancer would associate this dowdy young shopper with the glamorous girl from U.N.C.L.E. April blended like a chameleon into the humdrum backdrop.

Slate ran an expert eye over the nearby pedestrians, then searched further back for a possible "tail." Nothing suspicious that he could see.

April Dancer slowed down to a shuffle. She and Mark had timed this carefully. She would not walk into the tiny tailor shop that loomed just ahead until assured she was not being followed.

Her eyes roamed across the street and met those of the man behind the grimy tavern window. Slate raised the tankard of ale to his lips. It was the all-clear signal. Shifting the unwieldy parcel to a higher position, with a quick lift of a hip, she turned into the dingy shop.

Slate continued to sit idly at the bar. April would be on the

U.N.C.L.E. side of a secret panel in a matter of moments. Even the possibility that a "tail," unobserved by him, might dash into the store after her, didn't worry him too much. The camouflage was virtually fool-proof. He knew from experience.

The tailor-shop was the top secret strategic entrance to the maize of electrically monitored corridors, offices, computers, experimental laboratories and high-powered transmitters that comprise the central headquarters of U.N.C.L.E. It was located innocently within the shadow of the United Nations Building on Manhattan's bustling East-side.

Slate looked at his wristwatch, then walked to the man behind the Racing Form and handed him a dollar bill. Resisting the urge to overtip, he rummaged through the change handed to him and placed a frugal fifteen cents on the mahogany before taking his departure.

The little gray-haired man at the steam-pressing machine looked up indifferently as Slate entered the tailor-shop. The girl behind the counter finished slipping a plastic cover over a blue suit and handed it to the shop's sole customer, a bald-headed man, wearing the twin to the covered suit he was now carrying.

Slate spoke to the girl behind the counter as the man was walking through the door. "I've lost my receipt. Mind if I look through the suits that have come back from the cleaner? Can't miss it. It's gray flannel with a red pin-stripe."

As the door closed, behind the bald-headed man, the girl pointed to the racked suits at the rear of the shop. Slate strolled to the racks, looked them over, gave his head a negative shake and disappeared behind another crowded rack.

The man at the pressing machine pushed a lever. Clouds of vapor issued from the exhaust and obscured an opening panel in the wall. Slate stepped through into a small anteroom. The panel closed behind him. He knew he was being scrutinized closely. A panel on the opposite side opened and he walked into the first of a labyrinth of monitored corridors that eventually brought him into Mr. Waverly's swank reception room.

The girl at the reception desk smiled a greeting, and gestured toward a door. "Mr. Waverly is expecting you."

An electric eye opened the door as Mark Slate approached. He walked into an office containing a single large desk, dotted with telephones, a flashing communications panel, several comfortable looking chairs and a divan.

Alexander Waverly extended a hand of greeting. Randy Kovac, one of the brilliant youngsters being groomed as future U.N.C.L.E. agents, waved to Mark from his post at the communications panel.

A slightly breathless April Dancer was just sinking onto the divan

as Slate entered. The newcomer noticed with amusement that the girl from U.N.C.L.E. had made a quick change into more alluring habiliment before the scheduled briefing in Mr. Waverly's office. One of the features of central headquarters was a well-equipped wardrobe room, where clothes tailored to each agent's measurement were available at an instant's notice.

Slate always made his wardrobe changes after the briefings, but a look at the rapt countenance of young Randy Kovac and the admiring glint in the boss's eyes, not only explained but, in his opinion, completely justified April's lightning transformation from the dowdy to the delectable.

Mr. Waverly waited until April was seated before returning to his chair behind the desk. Slate sat down beside his glamorous colleague, on the divan.

"First of all," Mr. Waverly said, "I want to thank you both personally for a job well done. Establishing a definite link between the Bahalia Movement and THRUSH was most important. You also did an excellent bit of work on the THRUSH aircraft. Mr. Slate, your sketches and written descriptions have proved helpful to our aerodynamics experts. So have your pictures, Miss Dancer. Now, let us talk about the future. We still have a tremendous task to accomplish. "

His gaze was quizzical as he surveyed them. "You were probably mystified at my allowing young Walton to be spirited away from his grandmother's estate. I can tell you now that I counted on the abduction. "

He raised a restraining hand as April started to speak. "Thanks to your persuasive powers, Miss April, we now have an agent located at the very heart of the THRUSH conspiracy. No one on our staff could have possibly gone behind the scenes as young Walton has–I see you have a question, Mr. Slate."

"Two, if you please, sir. Where is Bob Walton? And how do we contact him?"

"Before I give you and Miss Dancer your instructions, I'm going to test your powers of deduction. Where would you look for Mr. Walton?"

Mark Slate shrugged. "Deduction is not my cup of tea, but, at a rough guess, I'd say he and his grandmother could be at THRUSH headquarters in Tibet."

"And you, Miss Dancer?"

"Please forgive me if I seem to ramble, Mr. Waverly, but in studying your list of Bahalia's rich widows and their assets, I note that each one is a majority stockholder in an aviation company, a transcontinental bus or trucking company, or a railroad. This indicates a plot by THRUSH to take over America's transportation complex.

"The presence of former Nazi terrorist Kurt von Krause suggests that this transportation control could be a prelude to military action. THRUSH would want to establish a base reasonably close to the heart of America's transportation system, yet isolated enough to escape observation. When Bob Walton made it impossible for them to operate from his grandmother's Palm Beach estate, because his disappearance would be immediately investigated, they shifted to an even more secluded spot in the United States."

April shot a quick glance at Mr. Waverly. His features revealed nothing. She continued slowly. "I'm sure you have another list with the location of the American resort estates owned by all of Bahalia's fat cats. Now, you intend to pin two tails on the donkey who owns an estate, not too far removed from a metropolitan complex, but even more difficult of access than the Twombley place in Palm Beach."

Mr. Waverly's snort could have meant anything; even amusement. He cast a furtive glance at Randy Kovac. The young man at the control board caught the look and blushed a bright red.

"So help me, Mr. Waverly. I didn't tell–"

Mr. Waverly displayed one of his rare smiles. "Mr. Kovac," he said, "you have my complete confidence. I know you didn't tell Miss Dancer where she and Mr. Slate are being assigned."

He turned back to the waiting pair. "I am going to pin two tails named April Dancer and Mark Slate on a donkey named Penelope Pine. Mrs. Pine owns the most logical hideaway for THRUSH. Her wooded acres in New England are on an island that rises a sheer two thousand feet above the water. There is no way to get to the walled-in estate on the plateau except up a privately-owned cable-lift. You will both check in at a nearby ski resort named Franconick. It is only a short boat ride from Mrs. Pine's island."

Waverly rose to his feet, extended a hand, first to April, then to Mark, and handed them separate briefcases. "Detailed instructions are inside. Contact me when you locate Mr. Walton. Not before. Good-by and good luck."

SEVEN
LITTLE INDIAN–BIG MEDICINE

Members of the international set, who considered it an honor to be house guest on Penelope Pine's lofty acres, thought of her island estate as the last word in fashionable seclusion. National magazines ran picture-spreads of the mansion, the gardens, the view of the surrounding mountains from the top of its sheer cliffs and the electric cable-car that furnished the sole means of entry and exit.

Society's inner circle thought its fortress-like isolation was due to

“Penny” Pine’s snobbish desire to avoid the proletariat, but Penny’s long-since discarded friends of the Prohibition Era knew different. They were aware that she and her now deceased husband, Barney Pine, had selected this plateau, high above the placid waters of Lake Charlot, because it furnished them with a surprise-proof hideaway from the avenging guns of rival rum-runners. Like many of the now respectable fortunes, the Pine millions had emerged from the blood baths of the illicit booze era.

Penny sat before a mirror in her suite at the mansion and looked at her reflection with a Mona Lisa smile. She frowned her annoyance as the mirror revealed the figure of her personal maid in the background. Penny’s eyes traveled between her image and her maid. Maria would have to leave. She was far too elderly and sedate for the dynamic executive Penny had become.

“Yes, Maria?” she said impatiently.

“Pardon me, Madam, but Miss Gandura asked me to remind you that there will be a mystic conclave in the music room within a half hour.”

Penny nodded and waved a curt dismissal. Her eyes shone with the fervor of the fanatic, as she continued to admire her reflection in the mirror. She smiled happily as she recalled the ruthless way she had resumed active management of her trucking and bus enterprises under Bahalia’s direction. She had lopped off heads in high places. Key men in Krishna’s brain-trust had taken their jobs.

One of the fired executives had committed suicide. Penny had laughed like a hyena when she heard the news.

As Mrs. Pine neared the music room she sighted Annabelle Twombley walking in the same direction. The two linked arms. They surveyed the group in the large, mirrored room.

Penny saw Annabelle’s grandson, Robert Walton, in animated conversation with Gandura. She thought again how fortunate they were to have young Walton as a house guest. Dr. Conrad was a dear. So were Krishna, his aide, Fritz Waller, Dr. Conrad and Dr. Habib Mahommed, but Annabelle’s strapping grandson was the only man on her mountaintop retreat who danced the frug, the watusi and other way-out dances, with the verve of youth and the facility of an expert.

“I’m so glad Robert decided to become a disciple,” Penny said. She and Annabelle Twombley sank into deep comfortable chairs and smiled a greeting to the other disciples.

Mrs. Twombley nodded agreement. “The dear boy! I’m so proud of him. He’s the first male convert. Isn’t it strange the way the men in our set continue to resist the truth?”

“Not so strange,” Penny said complacently. “The men are the ones who have plunged the world into the condition it’s in. It’s high time

we took over, with the help of the divine spirit. Every day I see it more clearly. The only way we can halt this continuing descent into the abyss of war is through submission to Bahalia. Isn't it thrilling to play an important part in the divine spirit's plan for taking over the world by controlling its thinking?"

Penny drew a deep breath and sat more erect. "I love the feeling of power that it gives me to communicate directly with Bahalia. You and I and the other disciples will be the leaders of the new world."

Bob Walton left Gandura and sank into a chair beside his grandmother.

Doctor Mahommed and Gandura took their places on the dais.

As the tiny Indian beauty and the Hindu mystic began a singsong chant, a barely discernible mist of sweet-smelling anesthesia filtered into the room.

The built-in ventilation fans in the wall behind the dais blew the fumes away from Gandura and the mystic, but they did not have to depend entirely upon the fans for protection from the mist's insidious effects. Both had spent a half hour, previous to the conclave, inhaling an atmospheric antidote to the fumes.

Gandura's eyes swept over the disciples. They sat erect and at ease. They would remain in a drugged state for four hours. During that time they would receive individual instructions from "Bahalia." Each would leave the room and carry out those orders to the letter. None of the assignments were important. They were routine. This particular conclave was simply another in a series of experiments to prove that a combination of the mist and the spoken word could mesmerize an unsuspecting populace into obeying orders.

Gandura sighed softly as her eyes rested on young Walton. The pretty little Indian had no compunctions about using arrogant, overbearing dowagers for experimental purposes and as guided automatons, but she was disturbed about the brainwashing effects of the mist on this fresh-faced boy.

She knew only too well from the series of experiments they had conducted, over lengthy periods of time, that continued exposure to the anesthetizing mist transformed people into parroting puppets. Every one of the disciples in the room, with the sole exception of the boy, had long since reached that robot-like stage.

Gandura thought of the fate that awaited the "disciples." Before she, Mahommed and Dr. Conrad had journeyed to the United States, they had tried Dr. Conrad's revolutionary mist out on captive Buddhist monks. She had been impressed with the immediate compliance of this hostile group. All answered immediately to orders given under the mist. Six months of continuous exposure had made them permanently subservient to the will of their masters.

The tiny Indian's mind traveled in retrospect to the monastery that had served as an experimental station. The priests who continued to be exposed to the mist for as long as a year had become hopeless imbeciles. She shuddered as she thought of their senseless screams and distorted faces.

Mahommed's touch on her arm brought her back to the present. "You first," the mystic said.

Gandura scanned the memoranda in her hand. She began to intone instructions directed individually to the anesthetized disciples. She and Mahommed alternated. When they reached the end of the list, all of the women had left the room. Each had been followed by a turbaned attendant, who would give a detailed report on their actions later that day.

The mystic raised a questioning eyebrow as he pointed to young Walton. Gandura said softly, "I would prefer to give Robert his instructions privately, as usual."

Mahommed leered. "Of course, my dear." Gandura waited until the mystic had left the room before touching Bob Walton's arm.

"You will come with me," she said.

Walton nodded and followed her from the room. Gandura looked around cautiously as they entered her suite. There was no one in sight. She locked the door behind them and pointed to the divan.

"Lie there and make yourself comfortable," she ordered. Again Bob Walton complied. A moment later, she was attaching the tubes that would bring the atmospheric antidote she and Mahommed used into Walton's lungs.

"Breathe deeply, Robert. If anyone knocks on the door, do not answer. The door will be locked. I will unlock it when I return. We will go for a nice walk in the fresh air after your rest."

A moment later, the graceful figure was moving toward the door. The sound of a key turning in the lock was followed by the click of heels, fading into' the distance. Gandura reached the front door without incident. Donning fur-lined boots and a babushka, she shrugged into her warmest mink coat and strolled out into the plateau's snow-covered gardens. Arriving at a pavilion that overlooked the powerhouse and the almost vertical cables that linked the hilltop with the rocky shore below, she gazed down at the ice-covered lake.

One of her favorite pastimes was watching the tiny, skittering ice-craft that usually dotted the frozen surface of the lake. She saw one of the colorful little sail-sleds veer away from the pack toward the island's concrete pier. A bellow from a bull-horn warned them off.

Gandura smiled sympathetically. The two tiny figures in the craft seemed to be struggling with the sail. She watched the two frantically twisting figures try vainly to halt the progress of the skidding vehicle.

There were more and louder bellows from the shore, below.

The tiny craft, apparently out of control, zigzagged ahead until it was within a few feet of the pier. As the roar of a powerful motor heralded pursuit from the shore, the sails filled magically and the ice-boat went into a flapping, careening turn. The motor-driven ice-sled that had started after it, made a leisurely swing and returned to the shore.

Gandura was still smiling as she turned away and resumed her stroll through the gardens.

Down in the slithering sail-craft, a girl, bundled in a hooded sealskin parka, continued to scan the receding shore through a tiny telescope. The man at the tiller called out to her. She shook her head and lowered the telescope.

Mark Slate cast a disappointed look over his shoulder as he manipulated the ice-boat onto the fringe of a rotating group of similar craft.

"I was hoping you made contact while I was wrestling with the tiller and making like a novice," he said.

April Dancer sighed. "Not a peep. I don't mind telling you, I'm worried. We know THRUSH is holed up on that hilltop, but we don't know if Bob is with them. Worse still, we don't know if the guy is alive."

"It's maddening, all right. All we have to show for three days of going round and round that island fortress is a wind-burned nose apiece." Slate changed course and sailed along parallel to the island. "Let's give the blind side of the island a try."

"Okay, skipper, but I'm serving notice. If we don't hear from Bob today, I'm going to break silence and ask the boss for some kind of aircraft that can land us on that mesa, up there. We wouldn't have a ghost of a show taking over the cable-car. A dozen men piled out of that house when we skidded up close to the pier."

Slate maneuvered the ice-skiff around the tip of the island. He moved the tiller skillfully. They glided to a stop at the foot of a towering precipice, as he furled the sails.

Slate reached into his parka and extracted a package of cigarettes and a lighter. "Better have one. It may help thaw out your red, red nose."

April rubbed the inflamed member. "Feels like it's frozen." She took a cigarette from the pack and allowed him to light it

"I'll try first," Slate said. He flipped up the aerial on his fountain-pen, adjusted it for distance and pressed a finger on the signal button.

"One good thing about these latest models," he observed, "they don't give out with beeps the way the old ones did. If Bob is up there and alive-and carrying his fountain pen–all he'll get is a series of

gentle jolts against his chest or whatever."

They sat in silence as Mark Slate continued to signal. The battery wires in their parkas kept them from feeling the cold too intensely, but it was discouraging business, sprawling on a flimsy ice-craft, waiting for a return signal that, it seemed, would never come.

April said, "Bury your own red nose for a while. I'll try my luck for a change."

She flipped up her aerial and pressed the signal. Both of them gave a startled jerk. A voice came over fuzzily. It might be Bob Walton, but they couldn't be sure. The voice was too faint.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. said a silent prayer before speaking. "Is that you, Tarzan? Jane here."

The voice came through a shade stronger. "Gandura told me not to answer the door. She didn't say anything about not answering a fountain pen. She should have told me."

April's heart sank. The voice sounded like Walton's, but the words were those of a sleepy, bewildered little boy. She drew a deep breath and tried again.

"Listen carefully, Bob. You are tired and sleepy now. We won't talk any more. Take out your fountain-pen and press the bottom dot on the pen at exactly twelve o'clock tonight. I will call you then. Be sure you are alone. Don't tell Gandura or anyone else about my calling. Do you understand?"

Walton's voice answered, "I think I understand. You will call me, won't you? I like your voice."

April said, "Good. Now, press the top dot on your fountain-pen. The little aerial will go down. Put the pen in your pocket. Good-by for now."

There was a click that signified a cutoff.

April and Mark looked at each other in dismay. She voiced their collective thoughts.

"That certainly sounded like Bob, but if it is, he is in bad shape. Either he doesn't know who we are, or someone is impersonating him and trying to lay a trap for us."

"We'll find out, one way or the other, at midnight," Slate said grimly, as he unfurled the sails. They glided away silently.

EIGHT

JUST BETWEEN YOU AND ME AND THE PEN

A rhythmic tapping, just above his heart, partially aroused Bob Walton from sleep. He tried to ignore it, so that he could recapture the pleasant dream the pulsation had interrupted. The thumping sensation continued.

His eyes remained closed, but some remote flicker of the subconscious caused him to reach inside his coat and fumble for the source of the vibrations. His fingers encountered his fountain pen and almost automatically removed it from the inside pocket. The pen caught on the edge of the pocket, accidentally elevating the instrument's tiny antenna.

The blue eyes opened and gazed in perplexity at the tiny pen and its wispy, spider-like antenna. The combination of mesmerizing mist and oxidized antidote had left Walton in a semi-hypnotic state.

As he tried to focus on the pen, it spoke to him. Conquering a panicky impulse to drop the strange object to the floor, Walton removed the oxygen mask, sat erect and studied the pen closely. The voice spoke again. He felt, somehow, that it was important for him to answer. After several ineffective efforts, he managed to tell the pen that Gandura had left orders for him not to answer the door.

"She didn't say anything about a fountain pen," he added. "She should have told me."

The voice continued, but Walton found it difficult to concentrate. It was with a sigh of relief that he followed instructions to put the pen back in his pocket and wait for a midnight resumption of the talk.

April's plea for secrecy, plus a vague subconscious monitoring kept Walton from mentioning the strange experience when Gandura returned, helped him on with his coat and took him for the promised walk in the gardens.

Five minutes in the cold, crystal-clear air worked wonders. Walton breathed deeply and smiled at his companion, Gandura returned the smile as they walked arm in arm.

Arriving at the pavilion Gandura had visited earlier, they seated themselves on a bench. The little Indian studied the handsome features of the young man beside her with mixed feelings. She was thankful she had saved this nice boy's mind from permanent damage, but she had moments of unease. What if he were not as completely

under her control as he seemed to be? She had taken on quite an assignment. Keeping this young giant mentally whole, and, at the same time, submissive to her, might be a feat beyond her powers.

She stole another look at the boyish face and shrugged the thought away. Walton was under constant surveillance. The plateau was an armed camp. Even from where they were sitting, she could see some of the guards posted on the estate. There was no possible way for young Walton to toss a monkey-wrench into THRUSH's carefully laid plans.

Walton ran a hand over his left leg, frowning. "Funny," he said. "I dimly remember that this leg was in a cast, but I can't for the life of me recall how it got broken."

"Does it hurt?"

"I get an occasional twinge, but it seems perfectly sound."

Gandura laughed softly. "Judging from the way you do the frug with all the ladies, I would say the leg is very sound and very strong."

Walton shook his head. "There are a lot of things I can't remember. I must have had some sort of life before I came to this plateau, but my past is a blank. I've asked Granny, but she always gives me the same answer you do. Everything will be explained in due time."

His companion laid a tiny hand on his arm. "You mustn't be impatient, Robert. I promised you that I would explain all of the things you don't understand when the time was right. You will know everything there is to know, in the very near future. All I ask is that you follow my instructions. I never break a promise. You'll see. Please trust me."

Walton returned her smile. "I trust you, Gandura."

The tiny Indian sighed as she rose to her feet. She must overcome the feeling of guilt that this youngster's helpless faith in her continued to arouse.

"We must return to the house, my dear. I promised Mrs. Pine I would discuss the matter of replacing two of her servants."

Walton's voice showed his interest. He placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Which two? Let me guess."

His look was that of a mischievous boy. Gandura thought again how like a happy child this young man seemed when he was with her. She laughed and squeezed his arm.

"Very well, Robert. One guess."

"Mrs. Pine hates all of her servants, but I think she dislikes her personal maid and the butler most of all. Did I guess right?"

"*Out of the mouths of babes and innocents*," Gandura thought, as they trudged through the snow.

Walton tugged at her arm. "Tell me. Have I guessed right?"

"You did, dear, but you mustn't let Mrs. Pine know that I've told

you about her plans. She would be very annoyed with me."

Walton nodded his understanding as they entered the manse.

There was a stiff wind blowing, as Mark Slate jockeyed his tricky ice-craft into the shadow of the precipice. He saw that it would be necessary to toss the heavy drag overboard if they wanted to remain stationary.

April Dancer peered into the darkness and made an impatient sound. "Everything is cock-eyed on this assignment. Ordinarily, we could be sitting in our nice warm rooms at the ski lodge, while we contacted Bob–or whoever. THRUSH must have a really powerful transmitter and an even stronger scrambling ray on that plateau to keep us from breaking through before now."

Slate grunted an affirmative. "All of our luck hasn't been bad, though. We could have tried forever, without contacting anyone, if we hadn't accidentally hit this blind spot in their power set-up. Something between us and their scrambling equipment is acting as a buffer, thank heaven!"

He peered at the luminous dial of his watch. "One minute to midnight. I hope our young friend is the punctual type."

A voice that seemed to be in the sled with them said, "I'm not sure I'm your friend, but I am the punctual type. What happened to your voice? You sounded like a girl, before."

Mark and April exchanged stricken glances. The voice was Bob's. There was no question about that. There was no question about something else. Bob did not have the remotest idea who they were.

Slate swore under his breath.

"They've brainwashed the boy," he whispered. "What'll we do?"

April Dancer controlled her voice, forcing a naturalness which she didn't feel.

"This is April, Bob. April Dancer. It was my voice you heard before. Don't you remember me? We're friends. True friends."

She thought swiftly. "How is your leg? Is it all healed?"

The voice lost its guarded tone.

"If you know about my leg, you must be my friend. Can you tell me how I broke it? Nobody else will tell me, not even Gandura."

April said, "I'll tell you all about it when I see you."

The tone became stubborn. "Tell me now. I want to know."

"Stall," Mark Slate whispered. "Ten him about falling out of a tree, then get him off the subject. I'll try to think of something we can say, to get through to him."

April said, "You fell out of a tree. I can't tell you more than that, right now. Somebody may be listening. Tell me, Bob, can you walk on your leg? Does it hurt?"

The voice sounded puzzled. “What was I doing in a tree?” Walton asked.

“I can’t tell you that. Please, Bob, trust me. I promise to tell you the whole story when I see you. You’ve got to trust me.”

The listening pair heard a deep sigh.

“All right. I’ll wait. Are you a real person and not just a voice?”

“I’m very real, Bob. The pen in your hand is just a transmitter. I’m talking to you from a spot near your island. Tell me something about your activities. Is anything exciting going on up there?”

Walton answered, “I wouldn’t say it’s exciting, but Mrs. Pine is mad at her servants. She’s firing two of them, because they’re too old and set in their ways. Gandura is going to help her get two young ones in their place.”

Mark hissed into April’s free ear. “This may be our cue. Ask him who’s getting the axe.”

April nodded agreement. “Who is being fired, Bob? Perhaps I could have one of the jobs. I’m dying to see you again. We used to have such fun together. My brother Mark and I need work very badly.”

A delighted laugh came through. “That’s perfect! Mrs. Pine is firing Marie, her personal maid and Soames, the butler. You’d be swell for Marie’s job. I can tell by your voice. It’s young and peppy. Your brother can be the butler. This is great! I’ll tell Gandura right away.”

“No! Wait a minute, Bob. Let’s keep this our secret. Don’t tell Gandura or anyone. Not even your grandmother. Find out what employment agency Gandura expects to contact and let me know. We’ll play a little trick on them. Mark and I will be waiting for Gandura. She’ll hire us and then we can be together again. Will you do this for me?”

Walton’s voice was joyous. “You bet! I’ll find out first thing in the morning. Can you call me around ten o’clock? I’m usually alone at that time.”

Mark Slate grinned from ear to ear and gave April the V-for-Victory sign.

She said, “Ten o’clock is perfect.

Listen carefully, Bob. Look in your wallet and see if there is a small circular gadget there. There is? Good! Next time we talk to each other I want you to put that little thing in one of your ears and press the middle dot on your pen. That way, no one will be able to hear my voice, but you. And, Bob, remember. This is our own private secret. You mustn’t tell anyone about our talking pen, about our plans to join you up there or anything. If you do, it will spoil everything.”

NINE

COMING UP–0NE BUTLER, ONE MAID

Mr. Waverly's voice came through the office intercom clearly. April Dancer and Mark Slate exchanged smiles. The boss's diction, voice and haughty mannerisms were typical of the snobbish receptionist of an employment office that supplies the rich with domestics.

The voice continued: "Mrs. Pine informed me during our telephone conversation, that she is desirous of obtaining a butler and personal maid who are young enough to be attractive and experienced enough to be letter-perfect in the performance of their duties."

A dry rustling of papers filtered through to them. Mr. Waverly cleared his throat and resumed.

"This office has supplied Mrs. Pine with all of her upper echelon domestics for some thirty years. I feel that I am en rapport with her thinking and requirements. In examining the qualifications of every available upper-class domestic, I found only two that could meet her rigid standards."

More rustling of papers. He went on. "As you may be aware, the Duchess of Blatsford died recently. I persuaded Her Grace's butler, Slate, and personal maid, Miss April Dancer, to come to this country and enter the services of Mrs. Treadwell Caruthers, of the Beacon Hill Caruthers. By a macabre coincidence, Mrs. Caruthers passed away less than a month after they entered her service."

The voice paused again, Mark Slate whispered: "Ten-to-one the old boy is polishing his eye-glasses and giving Gandura the frosted optic treatment, at this point."

April stifled a giggle as Mr. Waverly resumed, "This very sad occasion made these two exceptionally qualified domestics available. I have arranged for you to speak with them."

A bell rang in the room that sheltered the listening April and Mark. The door opened in the office occupied by Mr. Waverly and Gandura.

The little Indian's gaze swept over the entering pair. The girl wore an exquisitely tailored black suit of conservative style. Her shoulder-length black hair hung in soft waves. The blond young man was attired in a charcoal gray suit that was definitely Bond Street.

Gandura hadn't expected them to be so attractive. The watching trio could see that she was both pleased and impressed.

Mr. Waverly replaced his glasses and peered owlishly at the visitor.

"I have briefed Miss Dancer and Mr. Slate thoroughly as to salary, duties and Mrs. Pine's requirements. Are there any questions you care to ask them?"

The Indian beauty shook her head and smiled at the pair. "None. I am certain Mrs. Pine will find them most satisfactory. Please arrange for Mr. Slate and Miss Dancer to be at the railroad station in Bedford Village, Vermont tomorrow morning at eleven. I will meet them with Mrs. Pine's power-sled and take them to the island."

She rose to her feet almost simultaneously with Mr. Waverly. Shaking hands with him, she smiled a farewell to April and Mark.

The trio exchanged grins as the door closed behind the Indian girl.

April said, "Mr. Waverly, I should be used to anything at this stage, but I never cease to marvel at U.N.C.L.E.'s contacts. How did you manage to take over this Boston employment agency long enough to sell us to Mrs. Pine and Gandura?"

Mr. Waverly looked pleased.

"That, my dear, is a trade secret. Suffice to say that we have vastly more far-reaching connections than a Beacon Hill butler emporium. Actually, this type of operation often furnishes us with excellent under-cover agents. Mr. Hawthorn, who runs this particular office, is one of many invaluable contacts.

"Normally, I would have allowed him to handle the matter personally, but the assignment is so important I couldn't take the slightest chance of anything going wrong."

He looked at his watch. "I have exactly one hour before my plane leaves for New York, so we must be brief."

Spreading two large charts on the desk, Mr. Waverly beckoned. "This enlarged telescopic picture is one of a series taken from our supersonic jet at an extremely high altitude. The lenses show the plateau occupied by the Pine estate, exactly as it appears to the naked eye. As you will note, the only clearing is the one which shows the mansion, its outbuildings, a large greenhouse, a number of small pavilions, the powerhouse for the cable-car and the gardens. The rest is a dense forest of spruce trees."

He rolled the picture and replaced it with another. "This telescopic picture was taken from the same invisible altitude with the last word in infra-red technique.

"As you are aware, Mark, the Allied Air Forces used a low altitude version of this same technique to spot the amazingly clever camouflage used by the Germans in World War II. Note the three circular blobs of red that appear in what the other picture portrayed as uninterrupted forest?

"We see here the fine Teutonic hand of Hitler's former henchman,

the villainous Krause. Krause has used the same type of camouflage by which the Germans concealed rocket-launching pads, factories, submarine bases and, in some cases, entire cities, from aerial view; a fine mesh of hand-painted canvas that stretches over the entire target areas. The rays of our advanced photographic process bounce off this camouflage material and give us an immediate color differential between the camouflage and the blue spruce of the forest."

Mr. Waverly peered at them through bushy eyebrows. "We can only guess what those three camouflaged clearings contain. An educated guess is that one is a landing and take-off area for the mysterious vertical lift air vehicle you saw in Palm Beach. Perhaps another conceals their wireless tower. The third may hide rocket bases and missile launching tower pads. Or it might be something as prosaic as a warehouse. There is, of course, only one way to find out exactly what the camouflage does conceal and that is by the old reliable shanks-mare method."

He squinted nearsightedly at the pair. "Odd isn't it? No matter how advanced we become in various forms of warfare and reconnaissance technology, it is the man on foot who eventually has to complete the job."

Slate's eyes showed his amusement. "I get it, sir. Leg-man Slate to the rescue. First time I can slip away from my butling chores, I'll perambulate into the forest."

Mr. Waverly's forehead creased. "I would advise extreme caution, both in your outside reconnaissance work and in ferreting out the secrets of the group in the Pine mansion. THRUSH would not hesitate to liquidate both of you if they discovered your identity.

"There isn't much more I can say. Keep in touch with headquarters. I'll have someone on alert day and night. I have a feeling you may have to work fast. It's just a hunch, but I think THRUSH plans to make some kind of a move very soon. I depend on you to find out what that move will be, before it is too late to prevent it."

He extended a hand to both. "This is one time when you will really be on your own. We couldn't possibly come to your rescue without staging a full-scale paratrooper assault on that fortress-like plateau. I need hardly say that such an assault would never be permitted."

His smile was wry. "The powers-that-be consider U.N.C.L.E. personnel expendable."

April Dancer was thinking of the boss's parting remark as she watched the landscape slide by with startling speed. The pilot of the propeller-driven ice-sled smiled reassuringly.

"Don't be frightened, Miss," he shouted over the roar of the motor. "I'm an expert with an ice-sled. Been running this one for years. "

April smiled back at the pilot.

Mark Slate, who had been calmly sitting back in his seat, suddenly realized that he was not acting like a butler. He assumed a sickly grimace and tried his best to look worried. It was obvious that Gandura had no need for pretense. She was pale-faced and shaking. When the power-sled roared to a stop at the pier below the cable-car, she breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"That ice-monster terrifies me," Gandura confided as she, April and Mark were being transported up the sheer cliffs toward the island's top in a swaying cable-car, with the same phlegmatic pilot at the throttle.

Slate's eyes were sympathetic. "You don't seem even slightly worried about this precarious vehicle," he observed, as the car lurched, dizzily on the almost vertical ascent. "Why the thing about the sled?"

"I have no fear of heights," Gandura answered. "Perhaps because most of my youth was spent in the mountains of Tibet. The motor-sled is another story. It seems on the verge of overturning every moment. After my first ride to the island, I had nightmares for a week. All the nightmares were alike. The sled had overturned and I was skidding helplessly across the ice toward the rocks, ashore."

Slate cast a furtive look back at the operator of the cable-car, before speaking. "Frankly, Miss Gandura, I think that big ape deliberately tries to frighten the passengers. If he had a little more intelligence he would realize that the sled would capsize immediately, if he struck an unexpected snag at that speed."

The little Indian's eyes were grateful. "Thank heavens someone feels as I do about that dreadful sled and its moronic pilot! When I speak to Mrs. Pine about him, she laughs at my fears."

Mark and April exchanged glances. It was the first time the conversation had veered around to the mistress of the manse, since Gandura had met them at the railroad station.

April said, "I'm surprised to hear that. I should think an elderly, well-bred woman of her type would be more sympathetic. Isn't she terrified when she rides in the ice-sled?"

Slate stole another look at the man in the rear of the cable-car and lowered his voice another octave. "Don't be silly. I'm sure the fellow keeps the sled down to a moderate speed when Mrs. Pine is aboard."

Gandura didn't comment until they had disembarked and were on their way to the manse. "Mrs. Pine is absolutely fearless. I shall never forget the day she took over the controls. Even this madman looked frightened. "

She hesitated briefly. "I may as well warn you. Mrs. Pine is a little on the crude side."

"Thanks for the tip," Slate said, as they entered the door of the house. "I always like to know what type of person I am working for."

Gandura gave him a conspiratorial smile. April tossed Mark a mental bouquet. Her colleague was getting off to a favorable start

April's elation was short-lived. As they followed the little Indian up a marble staircase, she saw Bob Walton descending the stairs. Her heart skipped a beat and she stole a look at Mark Slate. Only the merest flicker of an eye betrayed his alertness to the danger of the encounter. His face was an emotionless mask.

Gandura greeted Walton cordially. April braced herself and looked directly at the young giant. There was not the slightest sign of recognition in the blue eyes.

Gandura hesitated. It was obvious to the two newcomers that the tiny Indian beauty was at a loss as to the correct method of introducing a houseguest to just-hired domestics. April hurriedly bridged the gap.

"I am Miss April Dancer, Mrs. Pine's new personal maid. This is Slate, the new butler," she said to the now motionless man on the stairs. "Are you Mr. Pine, by any chance?"

Gandura's laugh mirrored her relief. She said, "Mrs. Pine has no family. This is Mr. Walton, one of the houseguests."

Bob Walton smiled, nodded politely and continued down the stairs.

April's eyes remained on the descending figure for a brief moment before she followed in the wake of Gandura and Slate. One nagging doubt marred her pleasure at having successfully hurdled their first obstacle.

Walton's poise in the face of the surprise meeting had been extraordinary. He hadn't indicated by gesture or facial expression that he and April Dancer were "pen-pals." Was the youngster a surprisingly good actor–or had their transmitted conversations been erased from his memory by a subsequent brainwashing?

TEN
HE'S WITH THE BIRDS

The conversation with Mrs. Pine was brief and to the point. Despite being visibly overawed by Slate's ultra-British accent, she was decisive and explicit.

April's duties would be light, but she would have to be available around the clock, except for Thursdays and any evening that would not interfere with the comfort of the mistress of the manse. Miss Dancer should feel free to consult with Mrs. Pine at any time, on the matter of free evenings.

Slate would have complete control of her domestic staff of twelve.

He would order for and plan the meals and would have time off similar to that of Miss Dancer's. What they did with their spare time and there they chose to go, was entirely up to them–with two exceptions.

"Gandura will brief you on that," Mrs. Pine said, as she waved a dismissal.

The two looked expectantly at the Indian girl after they had followed her into the music room. Her smile was warm and friendly as she motioned for them to be seated.

"As Mrs. Pine said, there are two taboos," she said. "Number one, the music room and this entire wing is off-limits to the staff during our religious conclaves. A gong will ring in the butler's pantry twenty minutes before each of our meetings. It will ring again when it is permissible for the staff to resume whatever cleaning and tidying chores may be necessary.

"The second taboo concerns the scientific experiments our medical staff is carrying on. The laboratories and the experimental area are deep in the forest. They are off-limits at all times. Yes, Mr. Slate?" as Mark raised a hand.

"Would you be kind enough to brief me thoroughly on this forbidden area? My hobby is long walks and I don't want to stumble into trouble. Am I to understand that I will not be permitted to enter the forest?"

"No indeed. You will be able to pursue your hobby without interference. There is a picturesque walk along the cliffs that encircles the entire forest area. You may roam at will through the trees that border the walk. The experimental area is deep in the forest."

She saw the question in Mark's eyes. "There's no danger of entering the area by mistake. It is enclosed by barbed wire."

Gandura hesitated perceptibly. "I may as well be frank with you. The experiments being conducted by our staff are highly confidential and necessitate the utmost secrecy. There are armed guards patrolling the entire length of the fence. I would advise against any adventurous explorations. The guards are armed with high-power weapons. Their orders are to shoot to kill, if they find an outsider within the enclosed area."

"Shoot to kill!" April repeated in shocked tones. "I think you'd better be very careful, Mark. You're always wandering around in strange places."

"Don't worry, my little chickadee," Mark said. "I have a strange aversion to being shot at."

The little Indian smiled as she rose to her feet. "I am sure Mr. Slate will not commit suicide." Her eyes travelled over April's modishly garbed figure in frank appraisal. "He has far too much to live for."

Slate grinned as he recalled the flush that spread over his colleague's cheeks. Only his restraining gesture had stifled an indignant answer to Gandura's sly remark. He stopped to peer over the edge of the cliff.

"Talk about suicide," he muttered, as he resumed his walk along the tree-shaded path. "These sheer walls would be sure death for anyone attempting to scale or descend them."

He had circled the entire forest and examined the cliffs along the route carefully with powerful binoculars. Slate was no novice when it came to mountain climbing, but be doubted that even a skilled team, with plenty of time and every type of equipment known to man could safely complete that descent, or ascent, for that matter. He hadn't found a crack or a crevice in the marble-smooth surface.

He looked at his wristwatch. He'd been away from the house about two hours. Time he was returning to his duties. He hadn't gone into the forest on this trip. He and April had decided it would be foolhardy to attempt a penetration until he had spent more time scouting the cliff area.

He looked about him carefully. This might be a good opportunity to attempt a contact with Bob Walton. After that first accidental meeting on the staircase, neither he nor April had encountered the youngster. Walton had taken his meals in his quarters. Slate couldn't be sure that Bob Walton had attended the conclaves, since there was no way of checking, without wandering into forbidden territory. A closely guarded private elevator shuttled the disciples to and from the music room.

Mark Slate continued to examine the adjacent forest and the path. No one in sight. Extracting his pen, he elevated the tiny aerial and adjusted the transmitter. He waited for five minutes and was about to lower the aerial when April's voice came through.

"Watch it, boy! Krishna, or Krause–take your choice–is hot-footing it down the cliff path. I was bundling Mrs. Pine for her morning walk to the greenhouse, when I heard the tail end of a conversation between Krishna and Gandura. He was berating her for allowing you to wander around the cliffs. The last thing I heard him say, as he dashed out the front door was, I'll put a stop to this damn nonsense, right now,' –Signing off."

By the time the fulminating Nazi terrorist had penetrated the cliff walk a hundred yards, he had regained his poise. Slowing down to a walk, he moved ahead carefully. Booted feet made virtually no sound as he probed deeper into the forest, along the cliff.

Krause had been on the path for about fifteen minutes when he sighted a bundled-up figure, seated on a large rock, just off the trail. He edged ahead cautiously. When he was close enough to recognize

the butler, he saw that the man was huddled over something white. A few more steps revealed that the butler was sketching something on a large pad. The sound of a twig breaking under Krause's boots arrested the sketching movement. Slate turned and surveyed the approaching figure.

Krause forced a genial note into his voice. "Well, well, Slate, what have we here? I understood that your hobby was walking. Are you also an artist?" He walked up behind Slate and peered over his shoulder.

Mark Slate calmly continued his sketching. "Please speak softly," he said. "It took me quite a while to locate this fellow. I don't want to alarm him."

The questing eyes widened in surprise. "By jove!" Krause said. There was a new respect in his voice. "That is superb! I've never seen color crayons used so skillfully. What a gift you have for detail! Remarkable!"

Slate lifted his binoculars, leveled them at the cardinal in the tree, then resumed sketching. As he continued, he found himself thankful that he did have a penchant for detail. He had brought along his sketch-pad and crayons.

Krause stood silent and intent until Slate put the final flourish to the sketch and smiled up at him.

"I sense the interest of an artist," Slate said as he placed pad and crayons in the leather container strapped to his shoulder. "Do you paint?"

Krause chuckled. "I do dabble with water-color and oils." His sigh mirrored genuine regret.

"I don't have your talent, I am sorry to say. I wish I could paint with your touch. That bird is pure arrested motion."

As they started toward the mansion, Krause gazed at Slate curiously. "Why does a man with your talent live the boring life of a butler?"

Slate's eyes revealed his amusement. "Thank you for the compliment. I'm afraid I don't agree with you as to the extent of my talent. As for my butling, I am doing what comes naturally. My great-great-grandfather was in the service of the Duke of Marlborough. Great-grandpere was with the Prince of Wales. Grandpere headed the domestic household of the Duke of Kent. My late father died in harness as the butler for the Duke of Connaught. "

His grin widened. "To put it crudely, there is a damn good living in domestic service, at my echelon. I get a salary in five figures and I keep it. No taxes. Also, there is the ten percent which I legitimately collect on all supplies that are bought for the household."

Slate saw that Krause was intrigued. "Confidentially," he

continued, “when my nest-egg has attained sizable enough proportions, I intend to devote myself exclusively to painting.”

They were nearing the house. Gandura, who had been awaiting their return, gazed incredulously as she noted that both faces were wreathed in smiles. She had been prepared for an acrimonious showdown.

As she scurried away from her vantage point near the door, she thought, “I have always felt it was silly to say that someone can charm a snake out of a tree, but seeing is believing. And what a snake our Mr. Slate has charmed!”

The Indian beauty was still smiling as she inserted a key into the lock of Bob Walton’s living-room door. She noted with relief that the youngster was sleeping, with oxygen-mask attached. Carefully locking the door on the inside, she peered at the tiny jeweled watch on her wrist. They had just twenty minutes. This was one of the few times Gandura had managed to slip into Walton’s quarters and administer the anti-mist oxygen before a scheduled conclave.

Downstairs, Slate and his impromptu walking companion were shedding their outer garments, when they heard the gong in the butler’s pantry announce the morning conclave.

Mark Slate grinned mischievously. He decided to tryout the newly formed camaraderie. “Better hurry, my friend, if you don’t warn to risk eternal damnation.”

The German’s snort was eloquent. “Senile idiots! Thank God the care of their pampered egos is not in my department. All the gold in the world couldn’t lure me into those meetings.”

He paused, wondering just how much he could say to this rather extraordinary young man. He decided it would be amusing to be partially frank.

“You see, my artistic friend, I am somewhat in the same boat as yourself. You find butling a lucrative business. I do very well with religion. Fortunately for my sanity, I supervise the distribution of Bahalia’s funds, while others perform its mumbo-jumbo.”

He studied Slate’s face for a moment. “One of these days, we must have a long talk. From a scientific standpoint, the Bahalia Movement is accomplishing miracles in medical experimentation. The money we raise through these stupid women has helped us develop really revolutionary breakthroughs in medical science. I don’t want to sound fanatical, but believe me, the entire world will eventually benefit from the experiments we are completing now.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Slate said. “I’d like to hear more about it when you have the time and the inclination. Well, we must go our separate ways; you to your business and I to mine.”

Slate counted heads when he reached the butler’s pantry and the

kitchen. All present and accounted for, except April. He didn't have to guess where the girl from U.N.C.L.E. was. He knew.

ELEVEN
SMART GIRL IN A DUMB WAITER

April Dancer tugged at the rope again and stifled a sneeze. The thick layer of dust in the shaft of the dumbwaiter told a tale of disuse. She continued to propel herself upward. It soon became obvious that the doors that once serviced the four floors had been sealed off with plaster. She continued her ascent until a faint light from the top revealed the shaft's sole opening, a weatherbeaten metal door.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. tried the latch. To her surprise it worked smoothly. With very little effort on her part, the door swung open. She stepped through and found herself on a small, flat section of copper roof. Turrets, steep tile-roofs and chimney-pots stretched out before her. She gave a tiny sigh of satisfaction. There it was. The reason for her scouting expedition; the huge glass dome of the music room.

Removing her shoes, April placed them out of sight, behind the tiny shed that housed the top, of the dumbwaiter shaft. She reached inside the lift, extracted the heavy woolen socks, sweater and knit cap she had brought with her, donned them and closed the lift door behind her.

A moment later, she was climbing gingerly up the precipitous tile to the ridge. When she reached the copper gutter at the bottom of the descent, on the other side, she saw that the glass dome was further away than it had appeared from the ridge.

April measured the distance with a practiced eye. A good five feet. She was relieved to note that the gutter encircling the dome was wide and free of ice. With only the briefest of glances at the snow-powdered brick walk, far below, the girl from U.N.C.L.E. leaped into space.

She peered down into the music room and breathed another sigh of relief. There was no mistaking that blond thatch of hair and the broad sweep of shoulders. Bob Walton looked healthy and happy. Her eyes traveled over the seated disciples and shifted to the dais, where Gandura and a man she recognized as Mahommed, the mystic, were standing.

Gandura was talking. Hurriedly fastening the acoustical device she always carried, to the glass dome, April inserted her tiny earphone. Gandura's voice came through, but it was partly obscured by a hissing sound. The girl on the roof heard a new note. Mahommed was chanting. The hissing sound continued to make the words indistinguishable.

The puzzled watcher continued to peer into the room. Was it her

imagination, or had the disciples suddenly become rigid and erect in their chairs? The hissing noise ceased. So did Mahommed's chanting.

April heard the Hindu say, "Relax, Gandura. The mist has them completely submissive."

The clang of metal startled April. The noise had come from the direction of the lift. She tore her gaze from the scene below and scanned the roof she had scaled, after leaving the dumbwaiter. There was nothing to be seen, but she heard a shuffling sound.

April measured the slant of the tile and decided that her only chance was to lie down full length in the wide, deeply indented gutter, where she would be invisible from the ridge of the opposite roof. Unless the person who had just opened the metal door of the lift, decided to duplicate the slide she had taken down from the ridge, she might avoid detection.

She eased herself into the gutter –and controlled an impulse to raise her head as the sound of heavy breathing followed the scraping sound of shoes on a tile roof.

Apparently the person on the ridge was satisfied with the brief inspection. There was the sound of scraping again and the thud of shoes coming to rest on the flat roof at the base of the tile. April heard the metal door clang again. Then silence.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. counted up to a hundred, slowly, before raising her head and scanning the ridge. It was empty. She gazed down into the music room and decided that it would be folly to linger any longer.

April Dancer listened intently for a moment, then leaped across the aperture into the gutter on the other side. She went up the tile like a frightened squirrel and paused at the ridge for a quick look. The door was closed. No one was in sight. She slid down the tile to the flat roof.

Despite the tiny dart-gun she extracted from the pocket of her sweater, it took will-power to slowly open the metal door. When she finally inserted her head, the dumbwaiter had disappeared. The ropes were motionless.

She decided to make her move. Her only chance lay in speed. Grasping the ropes, she pulled vigorously until the top of the dumbwaiter came into view, then gently tugged with her left hand while holding the dart gun in her right.

She relaxed as she saw that the lift was empty. April reached around the corner of the shed, groped for and found her shoes. She felt that the odds were with her. The absence of voices told her that only one person had followed her to the roof. If he were waiting for her at the bottom of the shaft, a quick shot and he could be stunned by a paralyzing dart from her tiny pistol.

April was about to shrug out of her sweater and step into the lift

when it suddenly sank out of sight. Her heart sank with it. This shifted the odds to the opposition.

Swiftly extracting a tiny blade from her bodice, April severed the moving cord. A moment later, there was a resounding crash. A cloud of dust ascended slowly. The dust emanated from the shaft and onto the roof. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. closed the door and slipped over the parapet.

As she descended swiftly, April thanked her stars for the U.N.C.L.E. training that had prompted her to make a thorough survey of the stone walls as an emergency exit, in case she was marooned on the roof. Tenuous vines and the grooves between the huge stones, furnished an adequate foothold for someone of her athletic ability.

Putting the dumbwaiter out of commission insured a reasonably safe descent. She doubted that her pursuer would react quickly enough to anticipate her scrambling down a stone wall.

Down in the kitchen, Mark Slate heard the muffled roar of the crashing dumbwaiter. Hustling down the stairs, he raced toward the bottom of the shaft, with his heart in his mouth. It was difficult to see clearly, because of the clouds of dust that billowed around him, but as he neared the shaft, he saw something protruding from the wreckage.

“Thank God!” he said as he saw the hairy legs and size twelve sandals. It took only a cursory examination to assure Slate that the man under the lift was dead. He retraced his steps to the kitchen, seized a bottle of Mrs. Pine’s best bonded whiskey, rushed back downstairs and broke the bottle over the wreckage. He then hustled out of the service door.

April’s pulse skipped a beat as she looked down from her perch on the wall and saw a figure waiting for her, below. It went back to normal quickly as she recognized Slate. A moment later she was being crushed in a bear-like embrace.

“Quick. I left the service door open,” Mark Slate panted. The two scurried around the corner of the building. A few moments later, April was drinking hot tea laced with brandy, and Mark was hovering solicitously over her chair.

“The staff is relaxing,” he explained, as April’s eyes roamed around the kitchen questioningly. “I sent them to their quarters as soon as the warning gong rang. Here, get out of that woolen stuff. I’ll hide it in the butler’s pantry.”

April had downed her second cup and was in a gentle glow by, the time Mark returned. She suddenly thought of the man in the basement.

“What about the character who followed me to the roof?” she asked. “I’m surprised he hasn’t turned in an alarm by this time.”

Mark Slate grinned sardonically. “The villain who pursued this

poor working girl will not turn in an alarm now, or ever." He told her of the crushed body in the shaft.

April said, "I don't want to sound too much like a heartless ghoul, but that is good luck. Now, no one will ever know that a peeping Tomasina was on the roof. Poor guy! Anyone with reflexes as slow as his, has got no business sticking his head into a dumbwaiter shaft."

The sound of the second gong interrupted them. April whispered, "Tell you all about my trip later on," as she made for the kitchen door. "The boss likes to have me waiting for her when she returns from her communion with the great spirit."

Mrs. Pine was starting up the marble stairs as April reached the top. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. watched the woman as she ascended. She suddenly remembered the Hindu's remark.

"So that's why the disciples seem to be in a daze after every conclave," she thought. "They're under anesthesia. The hissing noise. Now, I get it. That's what Mahommed meant when he said the mist had the disciples mesmerized. Darn the luck! If that snooper hadn't followed me up to the roof I might have found out what it was all about. "

She shrugged as she reviewed her hectic experience. "The trip wasn't a total loss," she thought, as Mrs. Pine came into the room with measured tread and glazed eyes. "At least we can report to headquarters that THRUSH has a revolutionary form of anaesthetizing mist. Now, all we have to do is find out why they're using it on the disciples."

TWELVE
"WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD

Kurt von Krause, alias Krishna, motioned for his bodyguard to remain, after the men had cleared away the debris and removed the body from the dumbwaiter shaft

"Hassan was one of our more stupid employees," he said. "He was fully capable of sticking his head into an elevator shaft, yanking a rope off its pulley and getting his head bashed in by the dislodged lift. Especially, if he was as drunk as the whiskey fumes around here indicate."

He paused. "Nevertheless, for the sake of discipline, we should make sure that it was an accident and not murder. There are fragments of glass all over the place. He might have been killed in a drunken brawl. Do you know if there was bad blood between Hassan and any of the other guards?"

Fritz Waller's grunt was eloquent. "There is bad blood between all of our men. I've had to break up a dozen fights since our arrival. I

tried to tell you. We should allow them to bring their women here. That is the only thing that will keep them pacified."

Krause shook his head. "You cannot force persons in a trance into accepting something that is against their inclinations. The disciples would kick over the traces and ruin our entire project if we turned this place into a harem. They do our bidding because they are firmly convinced they can do a better job governing the United States than their men can. They are delighted to help us take over the country. Take my word for it, my boy, they would not permit us to bring in Arab tarts."

"I suppose you are right," Waller said. "To get back to our mystery, I don't think any of our Arabs are smart enough to crack a man's skull, wreck an unused dumbwaiter, then place the victim under the wreckage to make it look like an accident."

He bent over and examined the remnants of the rope still attached to the shattered lift. Seizing the rope between powerful hands, he exerted his full strength in a savage tug.

"Strong as iron. Take a look at this rope-end. Not even slightly frayed. That is a clean cut. This looks like the work of an enemy agent. The basement opening is too small for anyone to reach up and cut the rope. I've seen the dumbwaiter here. It occupied the entire space. One could only reach the inside shelves of the lift. The rope was cut from the top of the shaft. It had to be."

Krause said, "Let us assume that an enemy agent has infiltrated this stronghold. Put yourself in his place. What would you destroy? A dumbwaiter? A dumb guard?"

Waller grinned sheepishly, but his eyes were stubborn. "The guard may have caught him snooping."

Krause's voice was soothing. "All right! I am convinced. Let us reconstruct the crime. The guard finds a stranger skulking around the basement. The stranger steps into the dumbwaiter, pulls it and himself to the top of the shaft, steps onto the roof and cuts the rope.

"The dumbwaiter drops. The even dumber guard obligingly keeps his head in the shaft until the conveyance comes down and cracks his skull. Then, the stranger, now marooned on the roof in broad daylight, attaches a rocket to his behind and shoots into space."

Waller burst into laughter. "I can never win an argument with you. Suppose you explain how the rope got cut. Our men had to break up the lift to get it off of the body, but the top is still intact, as you can see. There was no way for anyone to cut the rope from the basement."

"The explanation probably is very prosaic. The guard, obviously drunk, hears a noise in the shaft. He pokes his flashlight and his head into the opening. He hears the noise again. A rat? The moan of the wind? The late Mr. Pine's ghost? He sees the swaying ropes. He yanks

the nearest one. Nothing happens. The lift is stuck somewhere in the shaft.

"He yanks harder. The yanking gets more violent. It dislodges the rope. The rope slips, due to all this frenzied yanking, and is cut by the pulley's sharp edges. The lift drops. Curtains for our drunken henchman! Let us write off the incident as a freak accident and forget about it."

Krause linked arms with his smiling bodyguard. "Come. We have a lot of preparatory work to do before the Number One Man arrives in THRUSH's streak of harnessed lightning. Now, if your enemy-agent had a miniature of our flying miracle in his back pocket, I might go along with your theory."

Mark Slate removed the tiny amplifier from his ear, peeled the transmitter from the wall and sped up the stairs. The wine cellar was a good listening post. Only a few layers of plaster separated it from the rest of the basement.

He was fussing around in the butler's pantry by the time Krause and his bodyguard arrived in the kitchen. The former waved a friendly greeting.

"Let me know when you go sketching again," Krause called. "I'd like to go with you. I might even watch a bird or two, if you will allow me to watch you at the same time. I am determined to learn your technique with crayons."

Mark Slate came into the kitchen. "Why don't you come with me tomorrow? It's my day off. Cook has promised to prepare a snack. I'll tell her to triple its size. You look like a man with a healthy appetite."

"Confound the luck! I'm going to be tied up all day tomorrow." The German was obviously disappointed. "I don't suppose you could take Friday off instead?"

Fritz Waller snickered. Slate winked at the tall, turbaned bodyguard as he addressed Krause. "Your friend's snicker has just answered your question. I don't think I need to add that Mrs. Pine is as flexible as pig-iron."

Krause nodded agreement. "And just as dense. I'll figure out something. Good-by for now."

Slate waited until he was sure the two men had left the house, before he slipped down to the wine cellar, again. Blocking the door with a case of champagne, he extracted his fountain pen, elevated its tiny aerial and adjusted the instrument for short-range transmission.

April Dancer's voice came through. "Good timing. Her ladyship is taking a beauty nap. I'm in my room. Wait until I make sure no one is outside the door." Her voice resumed, after a brief pause. "I've tried to

contact Tarzan. No luck. How about you?"

"Ditto. We've got to reach Bob, somehow. It's frightening to think what they may be doing to him. We dragged him into this mess and it's up to us to get him out of it if at all possible."

Slate sighed. "First things first.

You can relax about the dumbwaiter incident. Our camouflage worked perfectly. I'm going bird-watching tomorrow. Our artistic terrorist and his shadow will be occupied all day, so that leaves only the small fry to get under-foot. What about you?"

"I'm slipping and sliding to the village for the day. Any news for dear old Uncle Alex?"

"The flying carpet is due here in the not-too-distant future. Wish I knew the exact time, but I don't. You already know that THRUSH has perfected a brain washing mist that has made puppets of the disciples. Obviously, they've gained control of the nation's transportation complex by keeping the old girls in a permanent state of submission. I've just learned that THRUSH has definite plans to take over the United States. It is very apparent that control of transportation, the mesmerizing mist and the mystery plane, play important roles in the takeover. I expect to pick up details, tomorrow."

"Try not to pick up lead-poisoning at the same time," April said. "Don't forget that 'shoot-to-kill' warning. And, I need hardly add, don't forget your paralyzing pistol."

"Right. One more thing, Keep trying to contact your pen-pal and I'll do the same. Over and out."

April tucked the tiny transmitter into the top drawer of her bureau and walked to the window. From this vantage point she could see a portion of the garden, with the blue-green spruce of the forest in the background. She drew a quick breath. There was no mistaking that tall figure. It was Bob Walton. She peered closely at the tiny form beside him and recognized Gandura.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. looked at her watch. Mrs. Pine should be snoozing another hour. She was into her fur coat and out of the door before the couple disappeared around a corner of the building.

April emerged from the door of the service entrance. She tried to form a plan of action. Rounding the corner where she had last glimpsed the pair, April paused to scan the surrounding terrain.

"I may never get another chance," she thought, as she spotted Gandura and Bob Walton, strolling toward a tiny pavilion at the edge of the cliff. "Trouble, here I come!"

Gandura was the first to see the approaching figure. She tried not to show her annoyance as she recognized Mrs. Pine's personal maid. She liked the girl, but felt that the fewer people young Walton was exposed to, at this touchy stage of THRUSH's maneuvering, the better.

The man at her side rose to his feet, as April entered the pavilion.

"Please sit down, Mr. Walton, the intruder said."I have no intention of barging in on you."

Bob Walton smiled vaguely and sat down. April turned to the little Indian. "Forgive me for intruding, Gandura. I only wanted to ask if you were going to the village tomorrow. It's a case of misery loving company on that fiendish ice-sled."

Gandura, her good humor restored, motioned to the bench beside the one she and Bob Walton were occupying.

"Do sit down for a moment, April. Robert and I were watching the tiny ice-boats. I think the different colored sails are so picturesque. What a pity we can't make the trip to the village in one of these little beauties instead of Mrs. Pine's awful mechanical monster."

"Then you're going tomorrow," April said. "I am glad."

"No. I'm afraid I can't make it.

I have too much to do here. I wonder if you would be kind enough to bring me a few things from the drugstore?"

"My pleasure," April said. "How about you, Mr. Walton? Can I pick up anything for you?"

"That won't be necessary," he said. "I'm going with you."

Gandura's gasp sounded almost like a hiss. There was consternation in the gaze she shot toward the young man beside her. "But–but," she began, and halted. This could be disastrous. She must collect her thoughts.

Walton's voice was plaintive. But what? You promised me I could go to the village."

"Yes. Of course I did," Gandura said. "But I also said that we would have to wait until you stopped having those blinding headaches."

"I haven't had a headache for days," Walton said. "Please, Gandura! They're showing 'The Wizard of Oz' at the village motion picture theatre. I saw it advertised in the paper."

The tiny Indian cast an oblique glance toward April Dancer. The girl returned her look with an unconcerned smile. Gandura knew she had to make a quick decision. It would never do to arouse this young woman's suspicions. She smiled and gave Walton's hand a maternal pat.

"You are right, Robert. I'll keep my promise. We will all go."

Walton smiled. He seemed to lose interest in the conversation. Turning his back to the girls, he gazed down at the tiny sails below. Gandura caught April's eye. She placed a finger to her lips, glanced toward the broad back and tapped her forehead significantly.

April nodded. Her eyes revealed understanding and sympathy. She turned to leave. "Au revoir, Mr. Walton," she said softly. "Tomorrow, we're off to see the Wizard."

THIRTEEN

THRUSH BARES HIS CLAWS

Mark Slate peered through the overhanging boughs. There was no one in sight. He scanned the ground below. A cushion of pine needles promised a soft landing. His eyes roamed over the length of fence. The points of the barbed-wire gleamed wickedly in the dim light.

He cocked a trained ear. The sleepy chirp of birds, the clack of crickets, the squeaks of foraging chipmunks, the sound of nuts being cracked by sharp teeth and the rustle and squeals of predatory field mice. Nothing alien to normal life among the creatures of the forest.

Peering down on the forbidden side of the fence, he measured the distance to the ground. Much too high for even a calculated risk! This was not the time nor the place to chance a broken limb.

Ah! There was the ideal combination. A lofty spruce on the safe side of the fence, linking limbs with a tree, half its size, within the spiked barrier.

The pine-needles muffled the sound as he landed with bent knees. Another period of watchfulness, before he flitted through the shadows, silent as the scurrying creatures around him.

A shrill chorus of bird calls froze Slate in his tracks. He was concealed within the spreading boughs of a tiny spruce by the time the cause of the feathered alarm appeared. Two men, muffled in parkas, passed within inches of his place of concealment. The belts around their bulky coats bristled with lethal-looking weapons.

Even in the murky light, Slate could trace the outlines of holstered pistols, dagger sheaths and dangling objects that he guessed to be hand-grenades.

"'Krause doesn't miss a trick," he thought admiringly. "If his guards flush out an intruder who shows fight, they slice him up at close quarters. If he runs, they shoot him. If the poor guy manages to hole up somewhere in the forest and returns their gun-fire, they blast him to bits with hand-grenades. "

Slate's jungle training told him to remain motionless long after the two men had passed beyond his view. He grinned wryly at the success of his strategy, as a single, bulky figure loomed up in the mist, treading softly in the wake of the advance guards.

The third man's tread was barely audible in the distance, when Slate resumed his course. The murk became almost impenetrable darkness. Looking up through the trees, he saw that he had reached

one of the canopies of camouflage designated in the aerial photographs. Slowing his progress to a noiseless shuffle, he peered about him. A flicker of light showed through the trees. Soon, it was a steady beam that served as a guidepost.

Slate had been prepared for a sizable operation, but the building he saw through the trees was much larger than he had anticipated. Ablaze with light, the structure sprawled over several acres of cleared land. The hum of dynamos reached him as he edged closer. Through the windows of the building, he could discern figures moving in and out through a complex of machinery. Further along, he saw white-coated men in a gleaming white-tiled laboratory, bristling with various types of chemical equipment.

The cautiously advancing Slate had made an almost complete circle of the building from the shelter of the forest before he spotted the entrance. There were no guards posted outside, but he could see two heavily armed men in the dimly lighted entrance-hall, behind the glassed doors.

Finally convinced that there were no roving men patrolling the area, Slate left the shelter of the forest and approached the structure. Keeping well away from the large splashes of light that filtered through glass openings, he edged along the walls to a latticed window and peered through the slats.

Row upon row of stacked cylindrical objects met his startled gaze. Practiced eyes identified the gleaming cylinders as the type of container used to store volatile gasses. An enclosed corridor of metal projected from the huge storeroom. Slate followed its course into the forest. Obviously a loading chain and it was equally apparent that it led to the landing field for THRUSH's supersonic air vehicle.

"The mist, of course," Mark Slate muttered, as he scanned the towering piles. "They've got enough of the stuff stored here to anesthetize literally millions of people."

His mind flashed back over the information U.N.C.L.E. had managed to accumulate, to date. "That's it! Incredible as it seems, THRUSH is planning to mesmerize entire cities and military centers."

His pulse quickened. The pieces of the puzzle began to fit themselves together. THRUSH now controlled the major transportation facilities of the United States, through its "disciples!"

His military flying experience told him that there was only one way to bring that mist to urban, military and industrial complexes. Planes would spread it in the same manner used to disseminate crop-dusting insecticides. Men in other planes would broadcast directives to the submissive multitudes. Still other planes would bring in hordes of top-level mercenaries to take over the military reins. Trains, buses and trucks would rush necessary equipment and personnel to strategic

points to enable the invader to remain in control.

"I can see obstacles to a takeover of this sort," Slate thought, "but it's a hundred-to-one bet that THRUSH has figured out a way to overcome them."

The hum of voices distracted his attention. He decided they were emanating from another latticed window, to his left. A moment later he was peering into an elaborately furnished office. He recognized Dr. Conrad. The medico was seated behind a huge desk. Three white-coated men were erect and listening, in chairs clustered around the desk.

Slate quickly fastened his acoustical device to the window-sash. Conrad's voice came through clearly.

"We have around forty-eight hours to finish our preparations for phase two. Our space ship arrives day after tomorrow. We will begin loading as soon as it lands. You have examined the craft's storage space, Dr. Aber. How many trips will be necessary to transport all of our mist to the designated flying fields?"

"I checked with the pilot and flight director," was the answer. "From the figures they gave me and the data I have accumulated here, seven flights will be necessary. Frankly, I would advise ten. Time is no object. The space ship can make that many round-trips, including loading time, in less than four hours."

Conrad nodded. "I agree. Why risk overloading? Now, as to the activities of you gentlemen and your staff. Do you feel that your men have been sufficiently drilled in spreading the mist?"

A cadaverous man with a nasal voice said, "As you are aware, our practice-flights over the wilds of New Guinea were completed without a hitch. Our lingual staff followed the mist-planes within five minutes. The drugged bushmen carried out all of the orders we broadcast through aerial audio-phones from the second formation of planes. I assure you, Herr Doktor, my crew is letter-perfect."

"Good! Now, we come to phase-one of General van Krause's invasion plan, with which we must dovetail. The general informs me that he and his technicians blacked out the entire East Coast of the United States on their recent test run with a single electronic scramble from the space ship to a vital point in the power lines.

"We are to meet with General van Krause in his tower office in exactly thirty minutes. He and his staff will have determined by this time, how many vital points they must scramble to paralyze the nation's entire power complex and how long the job will take. Are there any questions?"

The third man in the room said, "With your permission, I would like to drill my crew at least once more before invasion day."

Dr. Conrad said, "Of course. Will you need the gas-chamber?"

"No. We have no problems there. The gas-masks are leak proof."

"More parachute practice, perhaps?"

The man shook his head. "My men are veteran jumpers. It's not that. I want to make sure they know exactly what to do and how to do it, when they are confronted with military personnel who might conceivably have not been overcome by the mist. Our job is a tricky assignment. A lot depends on us."

Conrad's voice was soothing. "I do not have the slightest worry about your part of the operation and I know General van Krause has the utmost confidence in you. By all means, drill your men as much and as often as you think best. I know your reputation as a perfectionist. "

The man's pale eyes glowed with pleasure. Conrad smiled at him, before turning to the others. "I think we are in good shape for our conference with the General. Any more questions, gentlemen? I see that there are not. Let us–What is it Eric?" he asked, as a man in a white lab-coat burst into the room.

Slate stiffened involuntarily. A sixth sense told him this was trouble. He heard the man say, "Our sensitizor has picked up a foreign vibration in the area."

Conrad said, "Are you sure it is not from our own guards?"

"I've checked," the newcomer said. "They are well outside the magnetized area, making the usual rounds of the fence. This is definitely a stranger."

The medico leaped to his feet. "Alert the fence guards," he said to the speaker. "The rest of you go to your departments immediately and see that your men are under strictest security procedure. I will take some of our inside guards and flush out the invader. He won't get far, I promise you."

Slate cursed softly. He knew the odds against him. Removing the listening device from the window-sash, he ground it into the dirt with his heel and rapidly smoothed the surface over it, before heading for the nearest clump of trees.

Once inside the shelter of the forest, he moved cautiously toward file distant fence. He heard the sound of crashing branches behind him and realized that he had been spotted, as a shot rang out and a bullet whined by. Looking ahead through the trees, he saw the flashlights of another searching party.

His eyes went upward. He could never make it to the lower limbs of any of the surrounding trees, before his pursuers reached the spot.

Mark Slate shrugged and halted his progress. There were two finished bird sketches and one partially completed sketch in his knapsack. It was a remote chance, but his only one. He would plead absorption in his hobby.

“Don’t shoot,” he called out. “I surrender.”

His hands were raised above his head when flashlights pinpointed him. He recognized Dr. Conrad among the panting men who surrounded him.

“I’m Slate, Mrs. Pine’s butler,” he said, as two of the men seized roughly. “Sorry to have caused such a disturbance. Must have lost my bearings when I was crawling around in the trees.”

He tried to make his smile disarming as the flashlights continued to blind him. “I’m not very bright, but it seems obvious that I jumped down on the wrong side of that barbed-wire fence.”

Something struck his head with sickening force. Before he blacked he heard Dr. Conrad say, “You idiot! We do not want him killed”

FOURTEEN

WILL U.N.C.L.E.'S SLATE BE ERASED?

Dr. Conrad surveyed the unconscious figure on the couch a worried frown. His fingers drummed a staccato beat on the desk. Casting an oblique glance at the stolid faces of the two guards at the door, he shook his head impatiently.

This would never do. Fear was contagious and uncertainty could wreck their plans. He must bring his emotions under iron control. He drew a deep breath. The fingers ceased the nervous tattoo.

The primary factor, of course, was to determine whether or not the man was as absent-minded as he claimed to be, or a clever agent of their implacable foe, U.N.C.L.E. The medico's fingers poked through the contents of Mark Slate's knapsack that lay strewn on the desk.

There was nothing that did not bear out the captive's statement, but his presence here, at the most crucial stage of THRUSH's preparations, seemed to be stretching the long arm of coincidence out of proportion.

Dr. Conrad sighed. If the man on the couch were one of the nondescript minor servants on the staff there would be no problem. He would put him through the third degree, with Nazi refinements, then, regardless of the outcome of the questioning, liquidate him.

Mrs. Pine's major-domo was another story. The medico knew that Slate had been brought in specially to cater to the wealthy disciple's wants. Only convincing evidence that he was a spy would justify the risk of upsetting the owner of the plateau, by eliminating her butler.

Conrad sighed. "Why couldn't this troublesome fool have waited a few more days to barge into the forbidden zone of the plateau?" A groan from the man on the couch stirred the doctor to action. He beckoned to the guards.

Mark Slate opened his eyes slowly. The face above him was a blur. He tried to sit up. Firm hands pressed him back. He heard a voice say, "Tie him securely. We don't want to take any chances."

The man on the couch groaned as rough hands rolled him over. "Easy there!" he cautioned, as the rope bit into his wrists. "You're cutting off the circulation." He gasped, as his captors twisted his legs in back of him and linked the rope at wrist and ankle.

"Mrs. Pine is not going to like this," Slate muttered through pain-wrenched lips. "A few more minutes of this torture and I'll be out of commission for weeks. At least, loosen the rope enough to allow the blood to flow. The pain is unbearable. "

Dr. Conrad's voice was grim. "The rope will be loosened when you tell me how much you have learned about our secrets. Don't bother to repeat your lies about stumbling into this zone by accident. We have proof that you are an U.N.C.L.E. agent."

Slate spoke through clenched teeth. "If you are asking me if I am ready to say 'Uncle' the answer is Yes. Uncle! Uncle! I've had enough."

"Then, you admit you are an U.N.C.L.E. agent?"

Slate groaned. "I'll admit to any thing, if you will loosen this rope."

Conrad motioned to the men. The rope slackened perceptibly.

Slate flexed his wrists and ankles. "You certainly play rough, Doctor. Now, suppose you tell me whose uncle I'm supposed to be. Whoever it is, I'm it. I don't want to get twisted back into that position again."

The medico motioned to the men. The rope tightened. Mark Slate uttered an involuntary moan.

Conrad said, "Agent Slate, I would advise you to cooperate with us. What you are undergoing now is fun compared to what will happen if you do not tell us how much U.N.C.L.E. knows and where your accomplices are."

"Loosen the ropes. I'll talk," Mark promised. He reflexed wrists and ankles again. "There. That's better." Mentally, he was calculating the time. During the conversation he had overheard at the window, Dr. Conrad had said they were due for a conference with Krause in thirty minutes.

"Now, would you repeat your question, Dr. Conrad? I was in such agony that nothing you said made sense.

The medico made an impatient sound. "I advise you to quit stalling, Slate. I will give you one more chance. How much does U.N.C.L.E. know of our plans?"

"That's an easy question to answer," Slate said. "Uncle knows all and sees all. Next question."

As Conrad lifted a hand to signal the men, he said, "Before you go any further, I would advise you to contact my friend, Krishna. He will verify my story. As a matter of fact, Krishna would be with me, now, if he hadn't been too busy to go walking, today. He said he'd go with me if I put it off until tomorrow."

He twisted his features into a grimace. "Lucky Krishna! Unlucky me! If I'd had the gift of foresight I would have bearded Mrs. Pine in her den and insisted on having my off-day changed so he could come along. This is one time when misery would love company."

The medico's eyes were skeptical "A likely story," he said contemptuously.

A moment later he was speaking to the operator at the wireless tower. "This is Dr. Conrad. I wish to speak to Krishna. Yes. That is

correct. Please tell him it is urgent."

There was a brief pause, before he spoke again. "Hello, Waller. No, you won't do. I must speak to–" He hesitated again. "Tell him we found Mrs. Pine's butler, Slate, snooping around in forbidden territory. Slate claims that he entered the area accidentally, while he was getting ready to do some sketching. Yes, we have him here, in this room.

"Frankly, the more I talk with him the more I am convinced that he is an U.N.C.L.E. agent. Slate says Krishna promised to go with him, if he would wait until tomorrow. Yes, but wouldn't it be simpler if I spoke to him, personally? Oh! I see. Very well, then. I will wait."

Dr. Conrad muttered something indistinguishable during the pause that followed. "In twenty minutes?" he said. "Excellent. I will interrogate the man while we are waiting."

He cradled the receiver and beckoned to the men.

"Let us make the most of our time," he said harshly . "We will take him to surgery. My new truth-serum will stop his play-acting. Hurry, now. Untie him. He will react more normally, if his limbs are freed."

Mark Slate decided that he had never seen a needle so long and shuddery as the one in Dr. Conrad's hand. He winced as the point pierced his flesh. The first shock of the drug had an impact like a blow. He wondered what the medico would think if he knew that his subject had slid a far smaller needle into a vein and then tossed the needle away, before submitting to capture. Mentally, he crossed his fingers. U.N.C.L.E.'s anti-truth serum had always worked before, but the medico's new drug was an unknown quantity.

Dr. Conrad looked at his wristwatch. "Enough time has elapsed. Now, you will answer my questions truthfully. What is your name?"

"Mark Slate."

"Are you an U.N.C.L.E. agent?"

Slate's voice sounded genuinely puzzled, as he parroted the question. "Are you an Uncle agent? Are you an Uncle agent? I don't understand."

"Very well," the medico said.

"Forget the question. Now, think carefully. Why did you cross the barbed-wire fence and sneak into this area?"

"I don't remember crossing a barbed-wire fence," Slate said in a dazed voice. "I was in the tree, sketching a bird on its nest. I climbed down from the tree when I heard shouts and something that sounded like a shot. Something struck me."

His mouth worked silently for a moment. "I don't remember a barbed-wire fence," he repeated.

"You are lying!" Conrad shouted. "Tell me the truth. How much do you know about our mist? Where are your confederates?"

Slate's mouth seemed to be shaping words that would not come out. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"Mist? Mist? Oh yes! There was a heavy mist. It was difficult to see very far into the forest."

The medico's eyes almost popped with rage. "You are faking, damn you! Tell me where your confederates are, or I will kill you."

"Confederates," repeated the hoarse voice. "I do not understand."

The burlier of the two guards cleared his throat. "Forgive me, Herr Doktor, but do you think it is possible that he does not understand? I, myself, do not know the meaning of the word 'confederate.' Perhaps it would be better to ask him a more simple question."

Dr. Conrad flushed angrily, then burst into laughter. "You may be right, at that."

He seized a handful of Slate's hair and pulled his head back violently. "Are you a spy in the employ of an international organization called U.N.C.L.E.? What is your name and occupation?"

The hoarse voice answered, "I am not a spy in the employ of an international organization called Uncle. My name is Mark Slate. My occupation is butler to Mrs. Pine."

"What did you do before you became a butler for Mrs. Pine?"

"I was the butler in Mrs. Treadwell Caruthers' Boston residence."

"And before that, what did you do?"

"I supervised the household of the Duchess of Blatsford."

Dr. Conrad swore loudly, profanely and with eloquence. Turning to the guards, he said, "This man has been injected with some substance that makes him immune to my serum. He is not reacting normally to my questions. I am all the more convinced that he is an U.N.C.L.E. agent. Let us take him to the snake-pit. "

As the guards hustled him down a corridor, Slate pulled away for a moment and made rubbing motions on his arms and legs.

"Let me get my blood circulating," he said, as he reached from ankle to arms, again.

The guards pushed him forward roughly until he stood at the edge of a deep pit He heard the door slam behind them. As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, Mark saw that the bottom of the pit was alive with snakes. His eyes traveled over the writhing floor. There must be at least a hundred of the repulsive creatures. He recognized a dozen poisonous species in the wriggling mass.

Dr. Conrad's grim voice caused him to tear his eyes away from the nightmare scene.

"I'm going to give you one more chance to speak the truth, Slate. Either you tell me how much you know about our operations and where your confederates are, or we will throw you into that mass of poisonous snakes. Believe me, I am not bluffing."

Mark Slate said, “I could speak a lot better, if we stepped back a few paces. One false move here and we might all be catapulted into that pit. I feel a little faint. If I fall, I might drag someone with me.”

He smiled inwardly as the guards hastily dragged him back from the brink.

“That’s better. Now, Dr. Conrad, let us speak plainly. If I had the slightest idea of what you are accusing me of, I would plead guilty at once. I am not a hero. As a matter of fact, I probably am the worst coward you will ever encounter.

“You keep telling me that I am an agent of somebody called Uncle. All right. I am an agent of this man. Does that satisfy you? Take me back to your office and I will dream up a very convincing story of my connections with Uncle.”

“Very amusing,” Conrad said. “But, I’m afraid my sense of humor is worn thin, at this point. Once more. How much does U.N.C.L.E. know about our operations? Where are your accomplices?”

Slate sighed. “Wouldn’t it be much simpler to wait until Krishna arrives? He will verify my story. I’ll admit that I’m scared sick of those snakes, but I’m neither smart enough nor experienced enough to think up answers that will satisfy you.

“This whole thing doesn’t make sense. You can’t frighten me into admitting something that isn’t true. I wouldn’t even know how to go about pretending that I was a spy.”

Dr. Conrad said, “Release him, men.”

A second later, something hit Slate in the small of the back. He found himself plunging head-first into the pit. The reflexes of a superbly conditioned athlete helped him somersault into a standing position before he landed. He shuddered as his feet struck the writhing mass. The shock of striking fangs caused him to jerk convulsively.

As Mark Slate was sinking into a coma, he heard Dr. Conrad say, “Remember, men. His death was an accident. He broke away from us, ran down the corridor and into this room. He fell into the pit before he could check his forward impetus.”

The last words Slate heard were, “Believe me, it is better this way. It is this man’s life or ours.”

FIFTEEN
NEW SISTER-ACT
GANDURA & DANCER

Mr. Waverly’s dry, impersonal voice came through the transmitter with its customary brittle impact.

“That is an excellent report, Miss Dancer. Since transmission to and

reception from Mrs. Pine's plateau continues to be impossible, I have dispatched a relay-team. They will be on duty around the clock, at the base of the cliff, where you discovered the sole break in THRUSH's scrambling apparatus. From today on, you can count on direct contact with U.N.C.L.E. at all times. We have arrived at the stage where instant communication is a must."

"That's comforting news for a number of reasons," April said. "Communication is the most important, of course, but there also is the little matter of emergency escape. We've had a stroke of luck; I stumbled onto a cache of brand new parachutes in a storeroom of the mansion, this morning, before I left the plateau with Gandura and Bob Walton.

"When I told Mark, he said there is one spot on the cliff-trail, where the precipice dips in sharply. We can count on a clear fall, with plenty of room for the parachutes to open. It's nice to know that our team will have a better chance of picking us up than THRUSH's power-sled, which is stationed on the other side of the island."

"Good thinking!" Mr. Waverly said. "I advise you to use the parachutes as a last resort. If there is any other possible means of escape, in an emergency, take it. A surprise gust of wind from the wrong direction might blow you against the cliff and collapse your chutes, no matter how sharply the precipice curves in at that point."

April shuddered. "You are so right! Mark told me I should wait until the last possible minute before opening the chute, for just that reason. What are your instructions, Mr. Waverly? As you know, I have Bob Walton with me in the village. Perhaps I should say, Gandura and I have him. She and Bob are doing some shopping, right now.

"We took a couple of rooms at this hotel, so we could freshen up during the day. I'm to join them at two o'clock for the matinee performance at the local movie theatre. We should get out around four-thirty or so. Gandura promised Bob we would go to a dance at the town hall, this evening. The power-sled will be waiting to take us back to the island around midnight."

Mr. Waverly said, "At the moment I have no definite instructions for you. Try to contact headquarters before you return to the island, but don't worry if you can't make it until you are back on the plateau. Incidentally, what equipment do you have with you, on this trip?"

"I have my audio-device, teargas compact, sleep-inducing dart-gun and chewing-gum explosive."

A dry chuckle came through. "Quite a formidable array. I hope you won't need them while you are in the village. It sounds as though you are capable of wiping out the entire population."

"I promise you. I'll spare the women and children," April said. "Seriously, though, I know I don't have to tell you that I wouldn't

dream of using the explosives in a populated area, but it's nice to know I have them.

"That's a long, dark ride back to the island, at night. I like to be ready for any emergency. Yesterday's local paper carried a story of a prison break not too far from here. THRUSH's mercenaries are not the only hard characters in the vicinity."

"You are quite right to be prepared for any contingency. Now, Miss Dancer, I must terminate our conversation. A word of advice. Be ready at all times for a possible message from U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, either directly or through our men at the base of the cliffs. Keep your fountain-pen transmitter on your person, somewhere, so the vibrations can alert you!. Signing off. Good luck. Be careful."

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. waited for the click that signaled a cutoff, before lowering the antenna and placing the fountain-pen in a tiny pocket of her skirt. She reached into her handbag. It was a good idea to check equipment often and thoroughly. Everything in order. She rang for room-service. A short time later, she was showing the waiter where to place the tray.

As she lifted the silver cover from the main course and settled back with a gratified sigh, she thought, "I never realized what an exasperating and frustrating life servants lead, until I became a personal maid."

She smiled at the memory of the service-waiter's fulsome thanks. She knew she had over-tipped him outrageously.

"This has been so much fun," Gandura said, as the trio were leaving the village auditorium. "I don't think I have ever enjoyed dancing as much as tonight."

Bob Walton smiled boyishly. "That's because you and Miss Dancer had the best partner in the auditorium," he said.

"I'll buy that," April said. "You're a terrific dancer, Mr. Walton, I'll be honest with you. I hated it when the village boys cut in on–" She broke off abruptly, as a crowd of people milled around them.

The man who had taken their tickets in the auditorium rushed up breathlessly. "Isn't it exciting?" he burbled "They're making motion pictures for a television news show. They're up here because of the prison break. The director told me they've been taking shots of the prison all day and now he wants some local color."

A man with a megaphone shouted, "Hey, beautiful! I mean you, honey," he said, pointing to April. "Walk this way, please. I want a shot of you three leaving the local dance."

He nudged an assistant. "Get in there with your strong-arm men and separate the wheat from the chaff, boy. What do I pay you for?"

April stood, tense and irritable. She didn't like this. Crowds were

dangerous and the last thing she wanted was to be photographed for a national audience. She tugged at Gandura's arm.

"Let's get Mr. Walton out of this crowd, quickly. This sort of confusion could be disastrous for anyone in his condition."

The little Indian nodded agreement and linked her arm in that of their towering escort, but, before they could work their way out of the crowd, one of the men who had been standing beside the camera, reached Bob's side, grabbed him by the coat-sleeve and shouted above the noise of the crowd.

"Come on, big-boy. Bring your beautiful girlfriends with you. I promise you it will be painless. We haven't shot anybody lethally for weeks."

To April's horror, Bob Walton slumped to the sidewalk, dragging Gandura with him. Before she could reach them, rough hands were dragging her toward a vehicle that looked like a sound-truck. She felt her pocketbook being yanked from her hands at the same time she felt the needle in her arm.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. fought her way up from a welter of nightmarish dreams. As her eyes began to focus, she saw the apparently unconscious form of the tiny Indian girl, on the floor beside her. Her eyes swept over the room. It was bare of furniture. The plaster on the walls was cracked. Obviously a room in a deserted house.

Her heart gave a convulsive leap as she finished her optical survey. She and Gandura were the only ones in the room.

"Oh no! April moaned. Her bleary eyes surveyed the room again. The flickering light of an oil lamp showed nothing but the bare walls-and the prone figure of the Indian girl. There was no sign of Bob Walton.

April staggered to her feet. While one part of her mind was agonizing over Walton's possible fate, the other was puzzling over the fact that neither she nor Gandura had been tied up. She hesitated when she came to the Indian girl's prone figure and heard herself say in a thick, strangled voice, "I'll get back to you later, honey. I've got to locate our boy-friend, first."

She was halfway through the door before she realized she would need the lamp. As she headed back into the room, she heard Gandura groan. The Indian was struggling to her feet by the time April had reached the lamp.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. bent over and helped her to stand erect. "Don't try to talk," she said hoarsely. "Hang on to me. We've got to find Mr. Walton."

By the time they finished a shaky tour of the house, they had learned that it was a one-story, five-room edifice, completely barren of

furniture. They also had learned that Bob Walton was not on the premises.

April, who was still supporting Gandura with a trembling arm, led the way to the front door. The door opened with a creak of protest. They stood at the threshold and peered into the black night with sick eyes.

"This has got to be a nightmare," April muttered. She turned to Gandura, who was swaying unsteadily. "Honey, this can't be for real. You're just a fig–fig–figment of my imagination. None of this makes sense."

The Indian girl drew a deep breath. Her voice quavered. "I'm afraid it makes sense to me."

She handed April the piece of paper she had been clutching. "I didn't know I had it in my hand until right now," she said, with a catch in her voice. "I don't have to read it to know that it is a ransom note. Robert has been kidnapped. I am sure of it."

The words hit April like a splash of ice-water. She was suddenly and completely awake. Steadying the lamp, she held the crumpled paper within its rays. The blocked-out message was terse and to the point. She read it aloud:

If Mrs. Twombley wants to see her grandson alive, it will cost her a million dollars. We know she has that much money on deposit in the Bank of Milburn Village. She will be instructed on how and when to make the payment, through the mail. If anyone notifies the police, we will know immediately, Five minutes after the police are notified, Mr. Walton will be dead.

Gandura's voice revealed her panic.

"What are we to do? I simply can't face Mrs. Twombley and the other disciples."

She moaned like a wounded animal. "Everything will be ruined. So much is at stake. I can't begin to tell you what this means to our plans."

She made an obvious effort to regain her composure. "You mustn't think I am heartless, Miss Dancer, but even Robert's fate is secondary to the havoc this will wreak, once I tell his grandmother and the others what has happened."

April's head had cleared and she had arrived at a course of action. "Don't panic, Gandura," she said soothingly. "There's no reason why you should tell Mrs. Twombley or the others. The note says the kidnapers will notify Mr. Walton's grandmother through the mail. The letter can't possibly arrive at the island before day after tomorrow, through the regular mail.

"When it does, it shouldn't be any trouble for you to intercept it. You will have plenty of time to figure out what to say and do. Cheer

up, honey. Things aren't as black as they seem."

Gandura's voice revealed her relief. "You are right, of course. There is nothing to be gained by telling the disciples what has happened. I often keep Robert in his room for days, when he is showing signs of mental unrest. His absence won't be noted."

Her sigh was deep and tremulous. "I owe you a lasting debt of gratitude, my dear. May I call you April?"

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. patted the hand of the girl from THRUSH before crossing her fingers behind her back.

"Please do, Gandura. I have a feeling that ours will be a memorable friendship."

April took a quick look at her watch before pointing toward distant lights. "We probably are on the outskirts of the village," she said. "This dreadful nightmare seems to have lasted for hours, but it is still early enough for us to tidy up at the hotel and then keep our appointment with the man in the power-sled." .

Gandura gave an alarmed squeak. "Heavens! I had forgotten about him. How can we explain Robert's absence? The sled-pilot is not one of us, you know. He is a local resident. The man is a typical, shrewd New Englander. He won't be easy to fool. He has worked for Mrs. Pine for many years. He will be sure to tell her that Robert did not return with us."

April patted her hand again. "Leave it to me, honey. I know what to say. I'll tell him that Mr. Walton wants to play hooky from his grandmother for a few days and is staying in town to have fun with a village belle. Then, I'll ask him to be a good sport and not mention it to anyone, including Mrs. Pine and the boy's grandmother. The guy may be a weirdo in some ways, but he's human. All the world loves a lover."

She placed an arm around Gandura's shoulder. "Believe me, Gandura, I know the type. Those shrewd, down-East eyes shine with lechery. He will know exactly what I mean when I tell him that Mr. Walton is playing hooky with a local babe. And, more important, the old goat will get a big bang out of sharing that kind of a secret with two girls."

As they walked toward the village, April reviewed the night's hectic events. The startling speed of the action and the stupor induced by the injected drug had thrown her off-balance, but, now that her mind was clear, the puzzle was no longer a puzzle.

Her first emotion was one of annoyance. "Why didn't he tip me off? I might have hurt one of our own men."

The more she analyzed the fake snatch, the more she realized that it might have been fatal for her to know, in advance. She was a good actress, but she was sure she could not have put on a performance as

convincing as the one she had for Gandura, if she had known the score.

She smiled a secret smile. The coup had been sheer genius. What better way to get Walton out of THRUSH's clutches? Now that she could look at it objectively, she recognized U.N.C.L.E.'s technique. Once again she marveled at Mr. Waverly's resourcefulness and quick thinking. She slipped her hand into the pocket of her skirt.

"The sly devil! He even made sure that I wouldn't have my fountain-pen transmitter in the handbag they took away from me."

As they reached the paved street that heralded their arrival in the village, April stole a glance at the silent girl by her side.

"What would Mr. Waverly think if he knew that the girl from U.N.C.L.E. had formed an alliance with the girl from THRUSH?" She stifled a giggle. "Sounds like a sister-act in vaudeville. *Gandura and Dancer –Songs, Hoofing and Novelty Acts*,"

SIXTEEN
HOW BLAND CAN A BRITISHER BE

The watcher's finely chiseled features were a sphinx-like mask as Dr. Conrad and two assistants labored frantically over the recumbent body of Mark Slate. The eyes were the only live things in General von Krause's face. The sweating medico turned away from their almost maniacal glare and continued his administrations.

Krause was sure that Conrad would make every effort to save Slate's life. The doctor was even more sure. He knew, with dreadful certainty, that he was a dead man the moment the man on the operating table drew his last breath. Conrad had served too long under the Nazi terrorist to doubt that Krause would carry out his death-threat.

The acrid taste of fear boiled up in Conrad's throat. He mentally cursed his stupidity. How could he have made such a miscalculation? He must be getting senile. Krause had sensed immediately that the story of Slate's "accidental" fall into the snake-pit was a fabrication. Conrad shuddered. He had seen his superior officer severe a lying subordinate's jugular vein with one vicious swipe of a knife.

He gestured for his assistants to remove the cups that had been drawing the venom from Slate's veins and reached for the alarmingly limp wrist. His face blanched. The pulse was barely perceptible.

Conrad's hands trembled violently as he measured the antidote into the syringe. The virulent glare of the watching terrorist was tempered with grudging admiration as years of training and iron self-discipline took over. The fluttering hands steadied magically when the doctor was ready for action. The needle entered the vein with speed

and precision.

Time seemed to stand still as all eyes focused on the corpse-like form. Dr. Conrad's gaze shifted from patient to clock and back again like the eyes of a spectator at a tennis match. After what seemed an interminable length of time, he reached again for Mark Slate's wrist. His sigh of relief was audible to all.

Krause's rigid features did not relax until the man on the operating table was breathing deeply and regularly and the deathlike pallor had become healthy flesh tones. The Nazi general's gaze was sardonic as the doctor felt his way on quaking legs to a nearby chair. He waited until Conrad had emptied the brandy from a glass at his side.

"Come with me, doctor. What I say to you must not be overheard."

Conrad preceded Krause through the door. Fritz Waller followed in their wake. The terrorist motioned for Conrad to be seated at the desk as they closed the door to the doctor's office. Waller stood stolidly at attention, while the two men faced each other across the desk. Krause studied the fear-glazed eyes a moment before speaking.

"You are a lucky man, doctor. A lot luckier than the man whose life you just saved. He signed his death-warrant the moment he crossed that barbed-wire fence. It does not matter in the least whether he is an U.N.C.L.E. agent or the absent-minded bird-sketcher he says he is. We cannot allow him to leave this plateau alive, after what he has seen here today."

He shook his head. "It was not the deed but your timing that almost earned you a premature shroud. I thought you were a man of intelligence. No one should know better than you that our disciples are treading a hair-line between robot-like submissiveness to our orders and outright insanity. You saw what happened to the monks we used as guinea-pigs in Tibet.

"Why do you think we allowed Mrs. Pine to fire two servants and hire a new butler and a pretty maid? Only because it is of vital importance that she and her associates remain calm and contented until they are no longer needed. A first-class butler and personal maid are important to Mrs. Pine. If anything were to happen to either of them, she would become emotionally disturbed. If she kicked over the traces, it would bowl the rest of the disciples over like ninepins.

Krause rose to his feet. "In less than twenty-four hours we will place each of these women before a radio-telephone set and tell them exactly what instructions to give their personnel. Their voices must sound firm and authoritative when they give the orders that will set each of the country's transportation complexes in motion for our takeover.

"You idiot! If you had succeeded in killing Slate, all of our preparations could have gone up in smoke. Can you imagine what

would happen, if top-echelon transportation personnel were contacted by a horde of babbling lunatics?"

Krause paused at the door. "When Slate regains consciousness he must not see me here. To him I am. Krishna, a Hindu who paints badly as a hobby. You will see that he is escorted safely to the mansion, after you have tendered your abject apologies. We must keep him happy right up to the moment that he is thrown back into the snake-pit."

The grin that split the beautifully altered features sent shivers down Dr. Conrad's spine.

"It might be a good idea for you to bear in mind that even you are expendable. We have all of your data, and the men you have trained are capable of taking over your duties at a moment's notice. Think of that the next time you are tempted to disobey my orders. It might not be a bad idea for you also to remember how Slate looked wearing a kimona of writhing reptiles."

Back in his own quarters, Mark Slate waited until the guards who had accompanied him from the forbidden area had closed the door and he had locked it, before withdrawing the fountain-pen transmitter from his pocket. He had felt the vibration of the signaling device from the time he regained partial consciousness in the operating room.

Waiting until he was safely behind the door of a clothes closet, he elevated the antenna. "Mark here. What's up, April? It must be something urgent for you to shake the others and sail back to our blind spot."

A masculine voice answered. "You ought to know that I would shake the others any time, to talk to you."

Slate gasped. "Randy How the devil did you get in the act? Until now, we've been cut off from headquarters by the plateau's scrambling ray."

"You still are. I'm down here on the ice with several of my subordinates." A loud smacking noise came through, followed by a fervent "Ouch! Can't you take a joke?"

Illya Kuryakin's voice took over. "Hi, Mark. Mr. Waverly yanked me off another assignment long enough to assist the enfant terrible of the U.N.C.L.E. organization. I'm supposed to linger in this bleak, God-forsaken area long enough to break in baby, then shove off to greener pastures. Between teaching him the rudiments of ice-sailing and keeping his ego down every hour, I've been a busy man."

Make Slate chuckled. "Are you going to leave the child unattended when you shove off?"

"Nope. We've got a boatload of muscle-men with us. They'll take turns wiping the little-one's nose and giving him his milk. There'll be someone here around the clock. When top-executive Randolph Kovac

is off duty, Jim Schwartz will handle the milk. You remember Jim. We worked with him on that East Germany deal."

"Of course. Give Jim my regards. Listen, Illya, I want to make a full report, but I'm not exactly at my best right now. As soon as I take a hot shower, another shot of snake antidote and a half-hour's nap, I'll give you a buzz."

"What's with the snake talk? Are you serious?"

"Never more serious in my life. An hour ago, I was lying in a pit with something like a hundred poisonous reptiles taking turns at sinking their fangs into me. It's a long story. Tell you all about it, when my head clears."

"Before you sign off," Illya Kuryakin said, "let met brief you on our operations in the village. Sometime between eight and ten o'clock tonight, a gang of fake TV men will toss April Dancer, your little Indian girlfriend Gandura, and young Bob Walton into a sound truck and whisk them away. Bob will be rushed to Boston's Leahy Clinic for treatment. Miss Dancer and Gandura will be left in an abandoned house.

"I doubt very much that you will have to explain the situation to April when she shows up with Gandura and without Mr. Walton. If I know that chick, she will have figured out the pitch long before she gets back to the Pine plateau."

"You mean you haven't tipped off the poor girl? What a dirty trick! Serve you right if she blasts some of your men right out of their socks, when they try to put the snatch on her."

"Don't worry. We all know about April's reflexes. Two of our muscle-men will grab her arms and yank that lethal handbag away from her before she knows what's happened. Mr. Waverly hated to do it this way, but he felt that it might prove beyond April's histrionic ability to put on a convincing performance for Gandura's benefit.

"After all, the best way to convince THRUSH that it was a job pulled by local kidnapers is to slug, dope and manhandle an U.N.C.L.E. agent or two in the process."

"You'd better be kidding," Slate said. "Slug, dope, manhandle? Poor April! I'd better tip off the cook to prepare something hot and soothing, instead of the cold, midnight snack she's planning to whip up. Glad you told me. I'll put some water-resistant padding under the shoulders of my service jacket for her to cry on. I'd better sign off now, before I fall on my face. Back in a half-hour or so."

Mark Slate was toweling himself vigorously when he heard the sound of a knock. Slipping into his bathrobe, he opened the door. Krishna, alias Krause, smiled back at him.

"May I come in?"

"Of course," Slate said.

The man with the Indian features and bleak Teutonic eyes sank into a chair. Slate's face was deadpan as he seated himself on the divan.

"Can I offer you a cigarette, a drink, or something?"

"Not a thing, thank you. I hope you will pardon the intrusion, but I wanted to see if you were all right. I had a rather mysterious call a short time ago from Dr. Conrad. The good doctor wanted to know if I had promised to go for a walk with you. I told Fritz that I very definitely had promised and Fritz relayed the information over the phone.

"Apparently Dr. Conrad wasn't satisfied. He asked that I come over to his office. Seems his men picked you up on the wrong side of the fence."

The man in the chair looked at Slate curiously. The latter smiled and remained silent. Krause broke the silence.

"I couldn't leave the work I was doing for some time. When I finally arrived, Dr. Conrad informed me that he had apologized to you for his mistake and sent a couple of his men to escort you back to the house."

Slate continued to smile blandly. "That's about the way it happened," he said. "Dr. Conrad did apologize, and handsomely too, I might add. Charming man! Continental manners and a very gracious personality." He rose to his feet. "Sure I can't get you something? I have some of Mrs. Pine's best scotch tucked away in the closet."

Krause shook his head.

Slate continued to stand.

"Was there something else you wanted to say? I hate to seem rude, but I am exhausted. You have no idea how strenuous my hobby can be, at times. Perhaps you will honor me with another visit when. I'm less tired?"

Mark Slate was still smiling as he closed the door. Krause stood for a moment in the hallway. His eyes were puzzled as he walked away.

"I wonder what's going on behind that bland British exterior," he thought. "I expected him to give me a fang by fang description of his ordeal. I still don't know whether he is a spy or a muddled man. The confounded British have a way of keeping their own counsel, so his reluctance to give me the details of his experience doesn't prove a thing, one way or the other."

SEVENTEEN
SPRAY FOR A HUMAN SPY

April Dancer looked at her watch as she eased herself into a chair. Twelve-thirty. Instead of fatigue, she felt a bubbling energy coursing

through her veins. It was always that way with her. Intrigue, danger, the opportunity to use her powers of deduction. They stimulated her, as strong drugs affect an addict.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. smiled as she thought of Gandura's face, when the two girls parted for the night. The little Indian looked as though she had been drawn through a wringer. She had stifled a half-dozen yawns while trying to thank April again for her help. When she finally walked away, it was with the step of a sleepwalker.

After a quick shower, April slipped into skin-tight stretch-pants and lifted a warm sweater from a hook in her closet. Laying the sweater on a table, she sat on the edge of a chair and adjusted her fountain-pen set for short distance transmission.

Slate's sleepy voice came through. "Randy, will you please stop playing Junior G-Man? Didn't I tell you that I don't want an hourly report? Drink your warm milk and go to sleep. Your buzzer will alert you if anyone calls."

April smiled. So the ebullient Mr. Kovac was one of their contacts on the ice. The young apprentice was learning the facts of the espionage trade, the chilly way.

"Have patience with our U.N.C.L.E. starling, Mark. You probably were an even worse pest when you first tried your wings."

"Oh! April. Good to hear your voice. You sound very spry for someone who has been slugged, snatched and hidden away in an abandoned house. I have a feeling I don't have to tell you what the score is in our little kidnapping game."

"No. I got the pitch. It was patently an U.N.C.L.E. operation. It was a little rugged, but the boys weren't too rough. I have no bruises to show for the encounter. Have you heard where Bob Walton was taken?"

"He's safe, sound and under sedation at the Leahy Clinic, in Boston. Randy reported about an hour ago, that the doctors there are sure he will be mentally fit after a few treatments. "

"That is good news. What did you learn on your bird-sketching expedition?"

"The most important thing I learned, from a purely personal standpoint, mind you, is that our laboratory has perfected a really miraculous anti-venom serum. Lucky I tucked one of our standard antidote needles in my sock, before I left the house. Thought I might accidentally step on a snake while I was prowling through the forest."

His laugh was not mirthful. "It was really funny, in a gruesome way. Three doctors were working over me, like mad, trying to save my life, and there I was, in better shape than they were. You know that yoga trick we've been taught. The one where we slow down the pulse to a whisper and drain the blood away from our head. I hate to

boast, but I pulled it off to perfection."

April drew in a sharp breath. "What are you ranting about? Snakes? Anti-venom serum? Three doctors trying to save your life? Are you sure you're awake?"

The sound of a yawn came through. "Just barely," Slate said. "Look, dear girl, why don't you tell me what's on your mind, so I can go back to sleep? I'll give you the details of my hair-raising experiences in the morning."

April snorted indignantly. "You'll give me the story right now, or I'll tell Randy to contact you every five minutes, instead of every hour."

"Wait a minute until I get a cigarette and a cushion. If I can't go back to sleep, I can, at least, make myself comfortable."

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. thought of Mr. Waverly's querulous appraisal of the Slate penchant for comfort under any and all circumstances. She smiled at the memory of that dry voice. "Mr. Slate, you are the most horizontal young man I have ever encountered. I honestly think you would find a way to lie down if you were tied to a tree limb by your thumbs."

The sound of a contented sigh told her that Mark was in his favorite position. "I'll try to make it brief, my persistent friend. THRUSH guards caught me on the wrong side of the fence, knocked me out, tried to make me talk, and, when I kept mum, they tossed me into a snake-pit."

"Are you serious?"

"Never more so. I found the place where they manufacture the mist. The snake-pit is in the same building. I have an idea THRUSH technicians are using the venom on some sort of medical experiment. Anyhow, after they untied me, I pulled the anti-venom needle out of my sock, while I was pretending to rub my arms and legs to restore the circulation.

"Good thing they tried to frighten me into talking, when they threatened me with the snake-pit. It gave me time to plunge the needle and slip the empty back into my shoe. Incidentally, I've sent in a report to headquarters. THRUSH will start operation 'takeover' within twenty-four hours."

The voice ceased and the sound of snores came through.

"Mark! That's not funny! Stop clowning. We've got to act quickly. Listen. We've got to locate and steal a supply of their mesmerizing mist before it's too late. It's our only hope of stopping them. I don't know just how we can use it, but we'll figure out something."

Slate's voice showed that he was fully awake. "But how? The building where it's stored is guarded like Fort Knox. We haven't got a ghost of a chance of getting near it, much less lifting any of the mist

tanks. The entire area is magnetized. That's how they caught me. And, even if we could get through, there must be a hundred people in that building."

"I have a hunch they keep a supply of it in this very house," April said. "We know they have at least one tank of the stuff behind the walls of the music room. It was obvious they were spraying the mist past the people on the dais into the area where the disciples were sitting. That puts the source back of the dais, within a space ordinarily used for air-ducts. I'm going to get in back of that wall tonight. We wouldn't have a prayer in the daytime."

"Makes sense," Slate agreed. "Have you figured out a way to get into the music room? The whole wing is crawling with guards, day and night. I've tried snooping in that area several times. Not only that. The music room door has a lock that would defy Houdini. I tried that, too. We can't use our acetylene kits. They'd notice the hole in the door."

"I've got it all figured out," April said. "They keep at least one window of the music room open day and night. I noticed it. I suppose they have to leave it open to get rid of the smell and effect of the mist."

Slate sounded dubious. "That's four stories from the ground. And, I mean four high-ceilinged stories. Ah! I'm beginning to catch up with you. We can go up the same way you came down from the roof, after you cut the dumbwaiter rope."

"Not we, Mark. I. Those clod-hoppers of yours would never fit into the grooves between the stones on that outside wall. I've tennis shoes made to order for the job. You will be a lot more useful as a lookout at the bottom of that confounded wall.

"Incidentally, bring your spool of lightweight steel hemp along, so I can lower the tanks or whatever to you. I lost my steel twine, along with the other equipment I had in my pocketbook when U.N.C.L.E. snatched me."

"Right. You'll also need a chisel and a few other midget tools. I'll bring my kit. You can carry it in your knapsack. I've got an extra dart gun. You may need it. If you wake up somebody while you're prying off the duct grill, a well-placed paralyzing-dart is the surest way to put him back to sleep. How soon will you be ready to roll? And, where will we meet? I'd suggest the butler's pantry. If anyone finds us there, we can pretend we're getting a midnight snack."

"Check! Can you be there in ten minutes?"

"Make it fifteen," Slate said. "I didn't want to mention it before, because I was afraid you'd think I was weaseling out of doing the human-fly bit with you, but my legs are so stiff and sore I can hardly navigate. My reptile assailants, aided and abetted by Dr. Conrad's

blood-suckers, literally knocked me bowlegged."

April Dancer paused in her climb, halfway to the open window, as her hip began to vibrate. She and Mark had agreed on an alarm code. If Mark spotted anyone, or heard a suspicious noise, he would press the sending button on his fountain-pen transmitter until she received six distinct vibrations.

A pause, while she counted to twenty; then three more beeps would signify that all was clear. She clung to the wall and peered down to the spot where she had left her colleague. Inky blackness! She couldn't even see Mark's outline. The vibrations continued. "Five-six." She breathed a sigh of relief as the count continued on to twenty.

It was not the code signal. One of their agents was trying to contact them. Mark had allowed the count to continue until it reached twenty before he responded to the call, to assure her there was no danger.

April Dancer continued her ascent. In a surprisingly short time, one hand was grasping the window-sill. The other followed. One quick heave and she was in the room. The tennis shoes she wore made little whispering sounds as she made her way slowly to the dais.

The grill that concealed the ventilating system was the next step. She felt its surface carefully. Lucky break! It was constructed of wood. Her fingers explored the edges. She exerted pressure on a corner. The grill moved. This was a break! April wouldn't need any of her midget tools to dislodge the grill from the wall.

More pressure on the corner she had loosened. One more yank. The grill was in her hands. Placing it carefully on the floor, she tilted it against the wall and reached for the tiny flashlight.

A moment later she was on the inside of the aperture. The first thing she saw was an enormous tank with an attached nozzle that obviously was used to spray the mist into the music room. April's heart sank. She could never budge this monstrosity. Moving the tiny flashlight in her hand, she saw that the space behind the grill was surprisingly large.

She gave a little gasp of delight. Stacked neatly in a corner of the room were a dozen small tanks. Several of the tanks were attached to something that looked like shoulder straps. Portables, she decided. She peered more intently. Gas masks. At least a dozen of them.

"What could be sweeter?" she crooned softly. "Portable sprays and masks to protect us when we use them."

April Dancer bent over one of the portables and examined it closely. "Here goes," she muttered. "I've got to make sure,"

She slowly turned a valve. A hissing sound signaled the escape of some pressurized substance. April put her face close to the nozzle and

sniffed. An odor between ether and attar of roses assailed her olfactory nerves. She gasped. Even this small amount was potent. She felt herself blacking out. A quick tug at the valve and the hissing stopped.

"Talk about instant blackout," April marveled. One good whiff of this stuff will put you out like a light. I can't wait to try it out on a big, bad THRUSH."

She decided that two of the portables would never be missed, if she restacked them carefully. The gas masks were an untidy pile. There was even less chance of their absence being noted. All of the equipment was light. It took very little effort to readjust the pile and lift two of the portables and masks through the aperture. The grill slipped easily back into its niche.

In no time at all she was standing by the open window, fastening the twine to one of the tanks. One flash of the tiny beam. She saw an answering flash below and lowered away. A tug on the line and she pulled it up. The second portable and its attached masks went down without incident. Slipping the twine back into her knapsack, she threw a shapely leg over the sill and began the descent.

At almost the identical spot where she had received the "false-alarm" vibrations, April felt the tiny pen throbbing against her hip. She began the count. "Four-five-six-It had stopped." She counted an interminable twenty seconds. "Thank Heavens! There it was. Three distinct throbs."

She started to grope downward with an exploratory foot and found to her horror that both of her legs had become locked in a charley horse of bunched muscle, during her tense pause.

"It's like a cramp when you're swimming," she assured herself. She disengaged one hand from a crevice and began a slow and systematic rubbing of the rigid muscles. She could feel the muscles gradually relaxing. Soon the pain and the rigidity had completely subsided. As she started downward again, she thought: "Funny, the crazy things that pop into one's mind when you are exposed and vulnerable."

As April had clung spread-eagled against the stone-wall, part of her mind had been busy checking the vibrations and thinking of the probable danger on the ground, below. The other part had gone back up the wall and into the open window, above her.

The thought that had flashed into her mind was– "Wouldn't it be ironic if someone spotted me, stuck his head out of that window and sprayed me with mist. Spray for a human fly!"

EIGHTEEN
TEARS FROM U.N.C.L.E.'S BABY

The man at the prow of the sled took a long swig of hot coffee

from his thermos before crawling across to the opposite end. He looked down at the sleeping youngster. It was a shame to awaken the kid, but Illya Kuryakin had given them strict orders to change shifts every two hours.

"This sub-zero cold will put you in a mental fog, if you don't," he explained. "I'm leaving you only one sleeping-bag. That way, the man on guard won't be tempted to be noble and stick it out for another thirty minutes."

He grinned wickedly. "Also, it eliminated the temptation to crawl in the sack for forty winks when you're on guard duty." The man shook the sleeping form gently. "Sorry to disturb your dreams, Randy, but Illya was adamant about our changing shifts every two hours."

Randy Kovac stretched his mouth in a prodigious yawn, before struggling out of the cumbersome covering. "Right you are, Johnny. Did you hear anything while I was asleep?"

Johnny Corrigan played it deadpan. "Yeah. I heard some very alarming sounds."

The youngster looked at him in astonishment. His voice started at low register and rose to an indignant squeak.

"Why didn't you wake me up? Illya was very definite about our alerting each other if we hear the slightest sound out of the ordinary. What was it?"

"I had a hard time tracking it down," Johnny said. "At first, I was sure it was a couple of berserk bears locked in a death struggle, but when I finally located the noise, I realized it was coming from our community sleeping-bag."

Corrigan reached for the discarded bag. "Take my advice, Randy. When, or if you get married, don't ask for separate beds. Insist on separate rooms. Otherwise, you're apt to have the shortest honeymoon on record."

Randy chuckled. There was relief in the sound. The only thing that could get a rise out of him was the possibility of fouling up a mission. He catalogued the constant ribbing of his older colleagues in the same bracket with changing voices, pimples and other adolescent plagues. It was the price one paid for growing up.

He waited until the other man had fastened the sleeping-bag at the throat before looking at the luminous dial on his watch. Their relief team was slated to arrive in three hours.

He smiled at the already snoring Corrigan as he set the tiny alarm for five. That would give his team mate an extra half-hour's sleep.

"The old guy needs it," he thought. "I hope somebody gives me a break when I'm over the hill."

Johnny Corrigan was thirty-five years old.

While U.N.C.L.E.'s youngest agent was philosophizing on growing

pains and senile decay, there was a hum of activity on the opposite side of the island. General von Krause had just stepped out of the cable-car with his bodyguard and six of the plateau's Arab guards.

Krause returned the salute of the two men at the door of the cottage. A moment later, he and Fritz Waller were shaking the occupants into wakefulness.

Krause gestured toward the stove as he spoke to Waller. "Put some coffee on, Fritz."

To the men, he said, "Get into your warmest clothes. Each of you will pilot one of our sail-sleds on a complete circle of the island. A guard will accompany you."

He looked at his watch. "The first sled will leave immediately. The others will follow at three-minute intervals. We are using the sails because silence is essential. Try not to make any more noise than you can help. Captain Waller has been training you with the sails for just this emergency. He and I will remain at the dock with the power-sled."

Krause beckoned to the Arab guards who had followed them into the room. "One of you will go with the pilot, on each sled. You know how to operate the walkie-talkies I gave you. Call me immediately, if you sight a sail-sled or any moving object on the ice. I will give you your orders then.

"Be sure that you keep at least a half-mile apart on your round. If you spot anyone, try not to alarm them. Stay close to the cliffs. If there is anyone contacting the plateau, they will be there."

Waller waited until the last of the sails had melted into the stygian darkness before he spoke.

"Now, Herr General, perhaps you will tell me the reason for all this sudden furor. You yank me out of a sound sleep, rush me down here in a dizzying cable-car, then send the men scurrying off like a pack of hunting-dogs. Come now, at least give me a clue. What has happened?"

The two exchanged smiles. There was no mistaking the camaraderie that existed between these ruthless and hardened men. They had fought side by side in innumerable bloody encounters. Each had saved the other's life on numerous occasions. Perhaps their strongest bond was the unholy pleasure they shared in seeing an adversary writhe in agony under sadistic torture.

Krause said, "Actually, I find that a difficult question to answer. I awakened from a sound sleep tense, nervous and, yes, even fearful. I had a sudden flashback of yesterday's incidents. The butler's capture, Dr. Conrad's disobedient attempt to kill him in the snake-pit, the frantic efforts that saved his life and my talks with Slate in his quarters. I found my mind dwelling on that conversation. The more I

reviewed our talk, the more I became convinced that this man has to be an enemy."

He made an impatient sound. "To be honest with you, Fritz, I can't put my finger on any one thing he said or did that makes me so certain. Call it intuition. Call it a sixth sense, developed during years of espionage and sabotage activities for der Fuehrer. Or lay it to my subconscious mind, working away while I was asleep.

"Call it anything you like, but I suddenly knew this man was an U.N.C.L.E. agent. As you are aware, our powerful scrambling rays make it impossible for anyone on the plateau to communicate with the outside world. When I became fully awake, I realized that Slate must have fellow-agents nearby. It would not be too difficult to signal them with semaphore from the cliffs. "

Waller nodded. He had a great deal of respect for his friend's hunches. There had been occasions when they spelled the difference between life and sudden death. Before he could speak, the walkie-talkie crackled. A subdued voice came through. "General Krause, are you receiving me?"

"Yes. Quick, man. What is your name? What have you found?"

"I am Abdul Gamal, General Krause. We are in the first of the sail-sleds you sent out. I heard the sound of voices coming from the ice. The cliffs seem to act as a sounding-board at this point.

"The voices were plainly audible. I heard a man say, 'Illya was very definite about our alerting each other if we hear the slightest sound.' The flapping of something that sounded like a sail drowned out the rest. What are your instructions, sir?"

"Alert others at once. Use your short-wave. Tell them to furl their sails and proceed as slowly as possible until they reach you. Tell them to watch their radar flashes carefully so there is no chance of a collision. After you have them together, put out your ice-anchors.

"Leave one man to guard the ice-craft and advance afoot with the others to the spot where you heard the voices. If you can catch them unawares and they are not too large a force, seize them. If they put up a fight, fall back and call me at once. I don't want them killed. They are far more valuable to us alive.

"Also, I don't want any shooting. Try to conduct the operation silently. Captain Waller and I will be there two minutes after you call. We have something aboard that will take care of them efficiently and quietly. Over and out."

Krause grinned as he adjusted the shoulder straps of portable mist-spray around his subordinate's shoulder. "This will do the job, eh, my friend?"

Waller laughed. "We will have them singing 'Deutchland Uber Alles' before you can say 'Heil Hitler!' "

Krause cracked his knuckles impatiently as the moments sped by.

On the other side of the island, Randy Kovac sat motionless in the stern of the ice-sled, straining to the slightest sound and peering in all directions. This was one time when hearing was more important than sight. It was impossible to see anything a foot beyond the ice-craft.

He picked up his ears. Was the sound of shuffling feet? The noise ceased, then resumed. Randy reached into his shoulder-holster and yanked out his dart-gun with one hand. He shook Corrigan roughly with the other.

Years of experience in tense situations kept Johnny Corrigan mum as he felt the tug. He wasted no time. Unfastening the sleeping bag, he kicked it off. Another moment and his dart-gun was in his right hand, a teargas spray in his left.

White figures suddenly loomed out of the night. Corrigan was the first to act.

"Use the teargas," he shouted as he pumped gas at the approaching figures.

There was a chorus of gasping coughs. The white line halted. A sound behind them caused Corrigan to turn. Something hard and heavy descended on his head.

After firing his spray-gun, Randy turned, just in time to see Corrigan slump into the bottom of the sled. He placed a well-aimed dart in the forehead of the figure that was bending over his teammate. The man fell over the recumbent Corrigan, but another white-robed figure took his place.

Before Randy could pull the trigger again, his head was yanked back in a throttling hold and his arms were locked behind him in a vise-like grip. A very smelly hand shoved something into his gaping mouth. An equally odorous cloth pinned the gag in place. He felt an abrasive rope being twisted around wrists. Another smelly cloth blotted out his sight.

He heard a voice with a distinctly guttural accent say, "Mission accomplished, General. There were only two. We have them tied up. What are your instructions?"

Randy Kovac recognized the rasp of walkie-talkie transmission in the voice that answered.

"Good work, Abdul! Light a flare to guide us. We will be there in a few moments." The roar of a motor came through, then silence.

The boy from U.N.C.L.E. groaned. What a way to wind up his first really important assignment! His stomach constricted as he thought of Corrigan's prone figure. Randy had never witnessed violent death, but his teammate's limp body had seemed completely lifeless.

The distant sound of a motor became a roar. There was a swishing sound and a bright light filtered through Randy's blindfold. A man

spoke. Randy recognized the voice that had come through the walkie-talkie.

"Phew! So they used teargas on you. Here, Fritz. Circle around the area with this spotlight. We must make sure there are no others. What's wrong with that man? Has he been shot?"

The voice of Abdul replied. "I pulled a dart from his forehead. He seems to be paralyzed."

"Paralyzed? Give the dart to me, Abdul. I must have it analyzed."

Rough hands yanked the blindfold from Randy's eyes. The blinding beam of a flashlight caused him to wince. When his eyes became accustomed to the glare, they focused on the face that had been shoved almost against his own.

Randy's first thought was, "What an extraordinarily handsome man!" He suddenly realized there was something incongruous in that face. The tanned features were classic. The eyes were satanic. The gleam of white teeth creased the dark and beautiful face. The man before him laughed uproariously.

"What have we here? Don't tell me an infant caused this havoc? Come, Fritz, you must see this face. It is unbelievable. As I live and breathe, a baby U.N.C.L.E.!"

NINETEEN

ZERO HOUR FOR UNCLE VERSUS THRUSH

"Oh no! Not again," Mark Slate moaned. Only the discipline of years kept him from reaching into the coat pocket of his pajamas and throwing the pulsating transmitter across the room.

"Talk about above and beyond the call of duty," he muttered. Fumbling inside the jacket, he extracted the tiny set and elevated the aerial.

"Slate here. And, I don't mind saying I wish I was somewhere else. Can't it keep until daylight, Randy?"

April Dancer's voice came through. "Disconnect and go back to sleep, Mark. I'll take it. Go ahead, Randy."

"This is Jim Schwartz. You'd better stay with us, Mark. Tommy Taylor and I sailed in a few moments ago and found nothing but a pattern of gashes on the ice where Kovac, Corrigan and their ice-sled should have been. No blood, I hasten to add. Whoever captured them pulled the trick without undue violence.

"Judging from the marks on the ice, I'd say Randy and Johnny were overwhelmed by a sizable force. There's a trace of teargas left. They must have put up a battle. We were due to relieve them at this hour. I called you first. You two are in charge of the operation. I want instructions from you before I contact headquarters."

Mark Slate said, "You first, April. You're the strategist of the team. Besides, I'm in an absolute fog."

"Thank you, Mark. Jim, your first move should be to ask Mr. Waverly for reinforcements. Tell him they must be skilled in handling ice-sleds. You can rent the sleds from the same man who supplied your present craft. He has dozens of them. When you get your flotilla organized, take them to the opposite side of the island from where you are now.

"Stay well out from the shore and use the only dock on Mrs. Pine's island for a marker. Have your sled cruise around in an apparently aimless fashion all day. THRUSH lookouts at the dock will assume you are the usual run of sailing enthusiasts who slither around out every day."

April paused. "This is important, Jim. Now that our short-wave blind-spot has been discovered, flash-semaphore will be our only possible means of communication. We can't risk flags, so our only

solution during the daylight hours is U.N.C.L.E.'s daylight-semaphore kit. Without the glasses that make the flashes visible in broad daylight, plus the infra-red sending apparatus, we will be completely isolated. Are you equipped with a daylight semaphore kit?"

Schwartz's voice mirrored his disappointment. "No. I wouldn't know how to use it if I did. I've never learned the flash-semaphore code. All I know is the flag routine. My contacts gave up the light-code years ago when the new lightweight short-wave transmissions came in."

"I can understand that," April said. "This is only the second time in our experience when we couldn't get through with our short-wave. The other time was in East Germany. Mark and I were marooned in a castle on a mountaintop, THRUSH had every inch of the area blanketed with detecting devices. We didn't dare use our transmission sets. After we squeaked through that experience, Mr. Waverly put our technicians to work on the task of supplying an emergency substitute. The daylight-semaphore was the result."

Slate interrupted her. "Sorry to butt in, honey, but I just remembered that Art Loomis and George Kean are U.N.C.L.E.'s best semaphore men. If either or both of them are available, we're in business. There are a half-dozen others, but Art and George have had more experience than the rest of the agents. Ask for them, Jim, when you ask for the equipment."

April said, "Thanks. Now, back to Jim. Have your semaphore men keep an eye on the cliff-top directly above the cable-car route. If the weather is a bit hazy, you might not be able to see the cable pylons, but you can always pinpoint the spot by remembering that the lower terminus of the cable is the dock.

"There is a tiny pavilion at the upper terminus. I doubt if you can see it from the ice, but that is where either Mark or I will send and receive messages-whenever we can make it, of course. One more thing, Jim, get gas masks. Plenty of them. Now, Mark. Please take over."

"You've covered the situation beautifully, dear girl. Jim, I have only one thing to add. Get the hell out of that area, on the double. THRUSH is sure to patrol that particular spot regularly, from now on. Head for the village, pronto. Signing off. Good luck.

"Back to you, April. I suppose it's a foregone conclusion that Randy and Corrigan are on their way to my Waterloo in the forest. That's the ideal spot for a THRUSH type third degree. Johnny is an old pro. He'll see to it that both of them are inoculated against the truth serum. I tipped off Illya Kuryakin about the snakes. They should weather that, too. U.N.C.L.E.'s antidote is miraculous.

"If I know Krause and company, and believe me I do, they'll toss

the boys into the pit, after they fail to get any information out of them. I don't want to sound overly optimistic, honey, but I think we can count on getting the boys out of that pit alive."

April shuddered. "I hope you're right. Anyhow, we can't help them right now. Take a look out the peep-hole of your door, Mark. You'll probably see the twin to the guard who is posted outside my door."

Mark Slate groaned. "I don't have to look. I knew Krause wouldn't be fooled by my bird-sketching act for very long. That raid on our contacts below the cliff proved that he knows I'm an U.N.C.L.E. agent. He's keeping an eye on you, because we showed up here, together. He'll allow us to go about our customary domestic duties, under watchful eyes.

"I'd be dead now, if he weren't afraid of rocking the boat and getting Mrs. Pine and the other disciples emotionally upset. We're safe until the old girls have outlived their usefulness. Then, back to the snake-pit for me, if we don't clip THRUSH's wings first, of course."

April's voice was grim. "You and I have unraveled worse tangles than this. That was a real brain-flash when you stored the mist-throwers and parachutes on a top shelf of the butler's pantry. That's your exclusive territory. Not even a nosy servant will climb a ladder, open those cabinet doors and look in there."

"I must admit, it was a rather bright idea. And, it's the one place I can be sure of getting to the stuff when we need it. As you say, that's my territory."

April said, "You're not on duty until ten. Take a sleeping pill and set the alarm for nine-thirty. You're going to need all of your faculties when we get rolling. Little man, you've had a busy day."

"And a restless night," Slate muttered. "You're right, of course. I've got to have sleep. I don't think even Benzedrine would snap me out of the fog I'm in. G'night, dear girl. We'll map out our campaign tomorrow."

Mark Slate lowered the antenna of his pen-transmitter, placed the instrument in a drawer of his bureau and reached for the water pitcher. One sleeping tablet and one gulp of water later, he was in dreamland.

April was on the verge of lowering the antenna on her tiny set, when she felt the instrument vibrate. She heaved a sigh of relief as she recognized Randy's voice.

"April here. It's great to hear your voice, Randy! How in the world did you manage to use your transmitter? Mark and I figured you and Johnny would be getting the third-degree about now."

"The big boy evidently got word that the schedule has been pushed up a bit. He gave orders to have us kept on ice until he has time to put the thumbscrews on. We're in a room with no windows. They had us

trussed like Thanksgiving turkeys, but they've untied us. I guess they figured we would be in a more receptive condition for truth-serum if we weren't paralyzed with cramp by the time they got around to us.

"Before we were tossed in here, we heard enough to know that this place is jumping. I heard the guy they call General say that he needed all hands to remove camouflage. Looks like we're here just in time for the action. I'm not going to ask you what you have in the line of ammunition, but, knowing you and Mark, I'm giving U.N.C.L.E. the fat end of the odds, even if we are outnumbered."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Randy, darling. We have a couple of aces up our sleeve. All we have to do is play them right. Keep a stiff upper lip. Give Johnny my best. Mark's too.

"If there is any change in your status, contact me at once. I'll be available most of the time. If either Mark or I don't answer, don't worry. Just keep buzzing us. We'll contact you from our end, the moment we're ready to move. Over and out, Randy. And a special prayer for your safety."

General von Krause peered skyward. THRUSH's phenomenal aircraft was due to land in exactly five minutes. The sun would not climb to the top of the surrounding mountains for at least a half hour. That gave them plenty of time to raise the supporting poles and tie-in the camouflage net to the surrounding trees, after the plane landed.

"Fritz, my boy. We must work fast when the airship lands. See that the men are ready to replace the camouflage in record time. We can take no chances. One splash of daylight and a low-flying plane might spot our revolutionary craft."

His voice was exultant. "Tonight is zero hour. Tomorrow we will be masters of the United States. Then, the world is our oyster. We will not fail this time. There is only one military power in the world strong enough to thwart us and we will have that power on its knees within twenty-four hours, thanks to the mist, our organizing and the aerial miracle I see hovering above us, now."

The aircraft settled on the turf as silently as a bird arresting its flight. The exit hatch opened. Dr. Conrad, who was standing at attention with the other personnel, stole a look at the exalted expression on the faces of Krause and Fritz Waller, as a man with an awkwardly hanging right arm stepped out. The man's face was that of a handsome young man. Conrad knew that face. He had handled the anesthesia when Dr. Hubert Klein, undoubtedly the world's greatest plastic surgeon, had given it to the man.

Krause lifted one hand in an all too familiar salute. "Heil–" he began. The man on the ramp shook his head and smiled. "Welcome, Herr Director," the former Nazi terrorist finished lamely.

A moment later, the man with the strangely inactive arm and Krause were embracing. Conrad's salute was the conventionally upraised arm of a Nazi soldier. The newcomer returned the salute with his left arm. The gesture included all of the personnel. A cordon of sharp-eyed men, bristling with weapons, surrounded the newcomer as he and General von Krause disappeared in the direction of the laboratory.

Fritz Waller barked directions to the men. There was a controlled frenzy of activity. Two huge pneumatic cranes scurried about with a clatter of gear. Two hooded men raised a nozzle, attached to a tank. Poles began to rise on all sides. There was a loud hiss. All of the ground crew moved hastily into the forest. A completely odorless gas lifted the single gigantic section of camouflage-canvas to a height level with the surrounding trees. Hooded men, clinging to the limbs of the trees like monkeys, grasped the canvas and tied it into the foliage.

Fritz Waller gazed with gloating eyes at THRUSH's strange-looking aircraft, as it sprawled in the dim light like a gigantic bird of prey. His thoughts were exultant. When the sun went down at the termination of this day, the weird visitor from the sky would rise with the speed of lightning, to pounce upon a helpless and controlled populace.

TWENTY
A SAUCER IN U.N.C.L.E.'S LAP

April Dancer's touch was light and her fingers nimble as she adjusted the necklace around Mrs. Pine's leathery neck. The hard old eyes smiled back at April from the mirror.

The head of the menage was in a mellow mood. The household was running smoothly. Her new butler was a gem. And, so handsome! Her personal maid was the envy of the other disciples. And, now the crowning joy! Oran Thant, high priest of the Bahalia cult, was right here under her roof as a houseguest.

Mrs. Pine's sigh was one of sheer content, as her eyes travelled from the maid's piquant features to the priceless string of pearls that decorated her throat.

"I am wearing these in honor of our spiritual leader," she confided. "This is a great day. I will tell you just how great when I am permitted to do so."

Her expression was that of a sly child. "The great spirit has instructed me not to speak of our plans to any outsider until our mission is accomplished."

The phone on the dressing-table buzzed softly.

Mrs. Pine said, "Yes? Oh, it's you, Gandura. In thirty minutes? Very well. Will His Excellency be there? Of course. I understand. The high

priest must be alone when he communes with the great spirit. The library? I'll notify Slate at once. He will see that His Excellency is not disturbed. Will Mr. Walton be with us, today? What a pity! No. Mrs. Twombley is not in the least disturbed. She knows that her grandson is all right. Yes, I'll be on time."

She cradled the receiver. "I won't need you until after the conclave. Please instruct Slate to make sure the library is in perfect order. The High Priest will use it today as his headquarters. Hurry, child! The warning gong will sound in a few minutes."

As April started for the door, Mrs. Pine called after her. "Tell Slate that His Excellency is not to be disturbed under any circumstances. No one is to be allowed in that area."

Slate made the usual head count of the mansion's domestics and gave them Bahalia's new ruling, that the staff must remain in the kitchen until the second gong signaled the termination of the conclave.

"Mrs. Pine has a special bulletin for us, today. His Excellency, the High Priest of the Bahalia Movement, is making the library his headquarters. We are under strict orders to stay away from that area until otherwise notified."

Slate led April to one of the pantry's two stairways. They descended in silence.

"I know this wine cellar like the back of my hand," he whispered. Removing a large grill from the brick wall, he motioned for her to step inside. "The air-shaft you're in goes right past the library and on up to the roof. I have a hunch this High Priest character will be holding a strategy powwow. This is too good a chance to miss."

"Wonderful!" April said. "These bricks are a cinch to climb. Replace the grill. If anyone snoops around down here, I'll stay put until you signal me. Three beeps for all clear. One long beep and silence and I go on up to the roof. Okay?"

Slate nodded. Fitting the grill back into the wall, he hustled back upstairs. The sound of laughter, the hum of voices and the clink of silver told him that no outsider had entered the kitchen in his absence.

April Dancer kicked off her shoes and looked for handholds. The sound of voices speeded her efforts, as she made a cautious ascent. The voices grew louder. She peered through the ventilator grill and drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

Krause, Dr. Conrad and a man she had never seen before, were seated around a table. Her first thought was that the same plastic surgeon must have done the work on both Krause and the newcomer. The features were not identical, but the two men could have been brothers.

The conference had started a few moments previously, and April

Dancer hoped she had not missed too much. The newcomer was speaking. "… have done well, gentlemen. Everything here shows the mark of splendid organization. I am wondering, though, if we are not placing too much confidence in Dr. Conrad's mesmerizing mist. I witnessed your experiments in New Guinea. They were a spectacular success, but the bushmen have a very limited intelligence."

As Conrad started to speak, the director frowned and held up an imperious hand. His voice rose an octave.

"Please! I have not finished. You gentlemen have proved to me that the mesmerizing mist is mental control on a massive scale. You also have said you cannot force a person in a trance to perform an act contrary to his natural inclinations. Yet, we are expecting military and civilian personnel under mental suggestion control to follow surrender orders broadcast by an enemy-invader. This is something entirely alien to their natural inclinations. Do we not have a direct contradiction here?"

Krause waited until he was sure his superior did not intend to continue. "With your permission, Excellency, I will explain. After the mist immobilizes the targets, men from low-flying planes will broadcast only one message. The people will be told to stay in their homes, their clubs, their offices, or their barracks, if they are soldiers. In other words, they are to remain wherever they may be at the time they are immobilized by the mist. They will be warned that any action at all may result in death and they must remain in that inactive state until they hear the voice of the President of the United States."

Krause paused for dramatic effect. "We will have with us, on the THRUSH spaceship, an actor who is famed throughout the United States for his impersonations of the President. As you are aware, we will have placed the entire country in darkness. All power will remain shut off until we are ready to unscramble the cables. During the blackout, our ground crews will take over all radio and television stations. When we reactivate the stations, the voice of the Commander-in-Chief of the United States forces will instruct the populace over television and radio, through our ship's broadcasting facilities, to follow the orders of his officials.

"By that time, our mercenaries will have flown over the borders of neighboring countries, where they are now deployed. When key men give orders to military and civilian personnel, they will respond. There will be no reason for Americans not to follow the direct orders given them by the President of the United States."

The director's eyes blazed. "Magnificent! We cannot fail. When will you be ready for the initial move?"

"Our men will have loaded the space ship, including the firing tubes with our first cargo of mist, by now. We plan to wait until it is

completely dark before blasting off. We will make ten trips. With the phenomenal speed of the spaceship this will be enough to place the mist-tanks at every strategic airfield in the United States.

"After we scramble the country's power-lines, the spaceship will be the first to begin spreading the mist. Washington will be our target. The conventional planes will handle the other key cities and military installations. As you are aware, the disciples are giving orders to their personnel to turn over all equipment to us, at this moment."

The director leaped to his feet. His subordinates were standing when he spoke. "Return immediately to the laboratory. I will remain here until you have everything in readiness." He placed an arm about Krause's shoulders. "My faithful friend, we have waited a long time for this."

April Dancer was halfway down the shaft before Dr. Conrad and Krause reached the door. Mark Slate looked surprised as she slipped into the butler's pantry.

"That was fast," he said. "What's up?"

"No time for a report, now," she said. "I've got to get over to the pavilion and semaphore our men before that confounded gong rings again. How do I get out of here without attracting everyone's attention?"

Slate guided her to another stairway and threw a coat over her shoulders. "Right through the basement and out the door in the back. Good luck!"

April Dancer slowed down to a fast walk, when she reached the garden. It seemed ages, but was only a few minutes before she was flashing her infra-red message toward the knot of sailing boats in the center of the lake. She donned her receiving glasses hurriedly.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. was delighted. "Received your message," the return flashes read. "We will be on the dock, ready for action within two minutes of your go-ahead signal. All gas masks at the ready. We have enough men to overpower the garrison down here and take over the cable-car, if necessary. Ready and waiting for further orders."

A few minutes later she was with Mark Slate in the butler's pantry. "That was close," she panted, as the second gong signaled the termination of the conclave. "I'll brief you the first chance I get. Mrs. Pine gets furious if I'm not in her suite when she arrives. I'd better be there now. Don't go away, Mark. I don't believe I'll be too long."

April was back in five minutes. "The old girl was like a zombie when she walked in. She said she wanted to commune with the great spirit in solitude and waved me out the door. I'll give you a rundown, first, then we've got to do some lightning calculating. Time is running out on us."

Slate's eyes mirrored his admiration, when April stopped talking. "So, you've already set the wheels in motion. We've got to take over that airship and its cargo, but how?"

April studied her colleague's features. "Your first reaction probably will be that I should be placed in a padded cell, but I've got a plan. Crazy as it is, I think it will work. We're going to put the two guards outside that library door to sleep with our darts, spray Herr Director with mesmerizing mist and goose-walk him through the forest to that plane.

"I'll guarantee you that every living member of the THRUSH staff with the exception of a few guards at the plane site, and the two characters we are going to put to sleep, is at the laboratory, working frantically on last-minute preparations. I even saw Gandura and Mohammed trotting into the forest, as I was coming downstairs. Krause said the plane is already loaded, with mist."

She squeezed Mark's arm and whispered: "Including the firing tubes."

Slate whistled softly. "Crazy like a fox!" he said. "If we, by some miracle, can get that man in the library to the plane without being stopped enroute, the guards will be pushovers. It's a hundred-to-one shot one of the pilots win be aboard. A shot of mist from our portables; a directive to take off from Herr Director and we'll have this entire plateau mesmerized before you can say U.N.C.L.E."

"What about the buildings?" April asked. "Won't they protect those inside? That's the one thing I've been worrying about."

Mark Slate tried not to sound too pontifical. "Every building on the plateau has circulating air. The intake vents will bring the mist in as quickly as a man outside can breathe it."

April looked properly impressed. "That removes my last doubt. Now, all we have to do is extract our Nazi friend from his protective shell, spray him with his own preservative and serve him to U.N.C.L.E. on a flying saucer."

"You make him sound almost appetizing," Slate drawled, as he shrugged into one of the portable mist-throwers filched from the THRUSH stockpile.

April donned the other portable and was peering through the partly opened pantry door, with dart-gun in hand, before Mark's gas-mask was in place.

Lifting her own mask, the girl from U.N.C.L.E. whispered, "We're in luck. Both guards are in the hall."

Slate peered over April's shoulder. "We could be luckier. The way they're standing, it's impossible to hit them both at the same time. One yelp from the remaining target and we're out of business for keeps."

He started to speak again and stood with open mouth as April suddenly pulled the trigger of her tiny pistol. The man closest to them dropped with a dull thud. April fired again. The second shot followed the first with such rapidity that the remaining guard had no time to make a sound. Mark stared, transfixed, as the second victim fell noiselessly on top of the first.

"Shades of Annie Oakley!" he mumbled. "I'm almost ready to believe you steered the second guy like a woodsman steers a falling tree. That prone body certainly cushioned the sound of his fall."

April smiled over her shoulder as she sped toward the now unguarded door. She stopped several paces from the recumbent bodies and waited for Mark Slate.

"I'll open the door, drop to one knee and start spraying," she said. "You stand over me. That way, we can give the kraut a double dose before he knows what hit him. Don't worry about aiming. Shoot straight ahead. I spotted our target through the ventilator. He's directly in line with the door."

Slate laid a detaining hand on her arm. "What if he's moved? Wouldn't it be better to open the door, jump inside and locate him, before we turn on the gas?"

"That might give him just enough time to shoot one of us," April said. She snickered. "I'll stake my life he hasn't moved an inch. The last time I saw that egomaniac, he was sitting at the desk, with his good hand tucked under his coat, making like Bonaparte and admiring his reflection in a wall mirror."

Mark Slate patted her shoulder. "I'll buy your plan. We'll do it your way."

April threw the door open and dropped to one knee. Slate grinned as they pumped the mist into the room. Herr Director's hand was still inserted between the second and third buttons of his military jacket, as he snapped into a telepathic trance.

Slate prodded their anesthetized captive into a trot and peered incredulously into the surrounding forest. "I can't believe it. We've actually bypassed the laboratory without seeing a soul. It's almost too good to be true."

April looked around carefully before replying. "Actually, it's not so strange. Everybody is too busy to use ordinary precautions. They think they've got it made. I hate to bring this up, but even Krause and Conrad will be too occupied to stick their noses out the door."

Mark Slate shuddered. "I know what you mean. Poor Randy! Johnny is a hardened veteran, but I'm afraid the kid is learning the trade the gruesome way, about now."

They surveyed the spaceship carefully. There was no sign of life aboard.

“The bold approach does it,” April said. She prodded the mesmerized captive into action. As they neared the plane, four crewmen in mufti stood in the hatch. They stared, puzzled.

Slate’s bark was authentically Teutonic. “Herr Director is coming aboard, you dolts. Don’t you know enough to salute?”

The men jerked to attention. They were sprayed into rigid immobility a moment later. The pilot was the only other man aboard. When he saw the director, he was on his feet instantly. A cloud of mist and he was a statue.

April placed a restraining hand on Mark’s arm. “There’s one thing we didn’t think about. What about that curtain of camouflage up there?”

“No problem,” Slate assured her. “This ship has no exposed moving parts. We’ll go up slowly, drape the net around us and start spraying.”

April looked out on the strangely silent landscape as Slate ordered the pilot to make another pass over the plateau.

“That does it,” Mark Slate said, as they completed the circuit again. “We’ve spread enough mist down there to create a regiment of Zombies. Now, all we have to do is yank Randy and Johnny out of that snake-pit and signal our men on the lake to come up and help us put these automatons in cold storage until Mr. Waverly decides what to do with them.”

Slate chuckled. “I’d love to swoop down over our gang in this sky monster, but we’d better signal them from the pavilion, as you promised, April. I’ll have the pilot put us back in our parking lot. Mr. Waverly would never forgive us if we left the outside world get a peep at this crazy, mixed-up space-bird, before his technicians have a chance to analyze it. Down, boy, down. We’ll put this saucer right in U.N.C.L.E.‘s lap.”